

# African — American

A Collected History

# Political

edited by

Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner

# Thought

## **African American Political Thought**



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Edited by Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner

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**In Memory of Jeffrey B. Ferguson (1964–2018):  
Teacher, Scholar, Friend**



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# Political Theorizing in Black

## An Introduction

Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner

*African American Political Thought: A Collected History* heralds the emergence of an interdisciplinary field of study that has been in the academic making for more than a quarter century. Though the tradition of African American political thought goes back to the origins of the republic, the field's professional academic founders are scholars in black studies, women's studies, philosophy, history, law, literature, and political science who have insisted that both their academic peers and the broader public take African American writers seriously as sources of political knowledge and philosophical reflection. A partial list of these scholars includes Leonard Harris, whose 1983 volume *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917* articulated the coherence of African American philosophy as a genre of inquiry; Cedric Robinson, whose 1983 *Black Marxism* made "the black radical tradition" a touchstone of black discourse; Patricia Hill Collins, whose 1990 *Black Feminist Thought* synthesized that tradition from Maria Stewart to Alice Walker and elaborated its philosophical and political implications; Bernard Boxill, whose 1992 article "Two Traditions in African American Political Philosophy" traced the conflict between separatist and assimilationist traditions and remains a landmark in the academic literature; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, whose 1995 *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* offered a provisional canon of major writings from US black feminism and made those writings broadly accessible; Michael Dawson, whose 2001 *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* created a taxonomy of six different African American political ideologies and explained their relationship to both classic black thinkers and black public opinion; and Robert Gooding-Williams, whose 2009 *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* set a new standard for the careful philosophical explication of individual black thinkers such as Douglass and Du Bois.<sup>1</sup>

1 Leonard Harris, ed., *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, 2nd ed. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, [1983] 2000); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [1983] 2000); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, new ed. (New York: Routledge, [1990] 2009); Bernard Boxill, "Two Traditions in African American Political Philosophy," *Philosophical Forum* 24, nos. 1–3 (1992–93): 119–35; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist*

This book extends their work by offering a “collected history” of African American political thought: thirty chapters on thirty African American thinkers from Phillis Wheatley to Cornel West, written by thirty scholars spanning political science, philosophy, history, English, religious studies, legal studies, and black studies. Why this “collected history” approach? How did we select which thirty thinkers to include? How do we view the status of the “provisional canon” this book creates?

We chose this “collected history” approach, first, because we believe that the study of African American political thought needs to become more thinker-centered, and we will argue this point at greater length later in this introduction. Much of the prominent scholarship on African American political thought of the last quarter century—such as the groundbreaking work of Robinson, Collins, Boxill, and Dawson—divides the field into a taxonomy of broad traditions or ideologies: black Marxism, black feminism, black liberalism, black nationalism, and so on. Individual thinkers are then categorized and situated within these ideologies. There is immense value in this approach because it helps us understand thinkers in terms of the larger histories—many tied to social movements—of which they are a part. The price, however, is obscuring the individuality of black minds, the ways the thinking of individual speakers and writers draws on various traditions simultaneously and exceeds any given conceptual mapping of African American political ideologies. Our aim is not to displace the ideological approach; after all, by placing all these thinkers together under one title we cannot help but suggest that a coherent tradition of African American political thought exists. Our aim is, rather, to supplement and counterbalance strong conceptual mappings with a thinker-centered approach that can give us a more granular view of particular minds.

Second, the collected history format enables us to achieve a breadth and depth of study of individual thinkers that would be virtually impossible to achieve in a single-authored volume. This in turn enables us to more fully display African American political thought’s internal heterogeneity, as well as the diversity of its rhetorical approaches—from Phillis Wheatley’s use of poetry to reconfigure American revolutionary political imagination (chapter 1, by Vincent Carretta); to Martin Delany’s use of the Roman concepts *cives ingenui* and *jus suffagii* to explain racial

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*Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995); Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Robert Gooding-Williams, *In The Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). See also Lucius T. Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman, eds., *A Companion to African-American Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003); Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, eds., *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (Lebanon, NH: University of Vermont Press / University Press of New England, 2007); George Yancy, “African-American Philosophy: Through the Lens of Socio-existential Struggle,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37, no. 5 (2011): 551–74; and Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

domination (chapter 3, by Robert Gooding-Williams); to Ida B. Wells's use of "data aggregation" to make patterns of lynching "knowable as patterns" (chapter 9, by Naomi Murakawa); to Toni Morrison's novelistic imagination of new norms of democratic responsibility (chapter 24, by Lawrie Balfour). The collected history format also allows us to display a variety of interpretive approaches to African American political thinkers: close philosophical analysis of a single political pamphlet such as David Walker's *Appeal* (chapter 2, by Melvin Rogers); tracing an animating political concept—nonsovereign freedom, for example, in Frederick Douglass—across an entire career and corpus (chapter 5, by Sharon Krause); identifying an all-encompassing political logic, such as political deception in Booker T. Washington (chapter 7, by Desmond Jagmohan); deciphering how an individual thinker such as Zora Neal Hurston synthesizes ideologies as seemingly opposed as proto-feminism and political conservatism (chapter 13, by Farah Jasmine Griffin). This reflects our belief that proper interpretation of African American political thinkers requires scholars to draw on a variety of interpretive strategies and to make context-sensitive determinations of which are most apt.

Third, we hope that the collected history will provoke new scholarship and debate. To select thirty thinkers for a volume such as this is to construct a "provisional canon" and thus to generate controversy. We made our choices based on (a) our assessment of the intrinsic theoretical interest of the thinker in light of the judgments of the field, (b) the need to achieve representative chronological range from the late eighteenth century to the early twenty-first, (c) our desire for a "big-tent" approach to political stances and expressive genres, from conservatism to revolutionary nationalism, from sermons to slave narratives to satire to Supreme Court opinions. Readers will undoubtedly argue with our choices on the basis of both our own criteria and their own separate criteria. There are other thinkers we would have loved to include that for reasons of time and space we did not get to include, such as Maria Stewart, T. Thomas Fortune, Alain Locke, and Hortense Spillers. The volume includes far more twentieth-century political thinkers—especially late-twentieth-century—than eighteenth- and nineteenth-, and far more men than women. In retrospect, we wish we had thought to incorporate politically significant musicians such as Billie Holiday and Public Enemy. Finally, we deliberately chose—over the objections of several colleagues—not to include Barack Obama: notwithstanding the quality of his writing and his historical importance, we believe it is impossible to get real perspective on Obama's political thought until he publishes more work that is further removed from the demands of electoral politics and the American presidency. There is more work to be done, even as we believe in the importance of the volume's intervention.

This book does not seek to end the argument of who belongs in the canon of African American political thought. It seeks simply to take that argument to a new level. In so doing, we recognize that we will reignite debates about the benefits and dangers of canon formation. We are not doctrinally committed to the promotion

of literary, philosophical, or political canons. Yet as scholars and teachers of the history of political thought, we cannot help but notice that some authors and texts command more attention than others; some authors and texts we teach more than others; some authors and texts repay rereading more than others. This attention to the comparative political and intellectual interest of works goes hand in hand with our enthusiasm for tracing intellectual particularity. This book cannot help but be seen as a recommendation list of who most deserves attention in African American political thought. The recommendation list carries the implicit claim that working through these thinkers offers opportunities for moral and political improvement that we are less likely to achieve in the absence of reading and thinking critically about their ideas. Yet we openly acknowledge the artificiality—the constructed nature—of the list. It reflects subjective judgments that are considered yet contestable. It also reflects chance events that attend the construction of any volume this large: we had planned chapters on Sojourner Truth and James Weldon Johnson, for example, but the authors dropped out.

The rest of this introduction will unfold in five sections. First, we will geographically map African American political thought in relation to Western political thought, Africana political thought, and American political thought. Second, we will outline two main approaches to the interpretation of African American political thought and explain why we pursue one approach over the other. Third, we will address how the study of African American political thought automatically reconfigures the study of American political thought at large. Fourth, we will argue that the study of African American political thought forces us to regenerate our understanding of democratic theory. Fifth, we will explain how African American political thought relates to the Western tradition of political thought going back to Socrates.

### **The Geography of African American Political Thought**

African American political thought lies at the intersection of the mutually constitutive fields of Western political thought, Africana political thought, and American political thought. Though these fields partially overlap, each has a different center of gravity: Western political thought in the traditional European canon from Plato to Locke to Marx to Arendt; Africana political thought in modern African and Afro-diasporic thinkers from Olaudah Equiano and Quobna Ottobah Cugoana in the eighteenth century to Anténor Firmin and George Wilmot Blyden in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter in the twentieth and twenty-first;<sup>2</sup> American political thought in the writings of thinkers ranging from Benjamin Franklin to James Madison to W. E. B. Du Bois to John Dewey to Gloria Anzaldúa.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Some—but not all—scholars of Western political thought include Afro-Caribbean and African American political thinkers within their conceptualizations of Western political thought. These theorists, for example, consider Du Bois and Fanon to be among Hegel's intellectual progeny. But within this conceptualization Du Bois and Fanon are offshoots of Hegel's branch. European political theory is central, Afro-Caribbean and African American appropriations of it marginal. Du Bois and Fanon are viewed, in other words, as subordinate in philosophical interest.

Most scholars of Africana political thought, on the other hand, acknowledge that their field is intertwined with Western political thought and American political thought. As Lewis R. Gordon observes, Africana political thought is “ironically inclusive”: “To articulate the set of problems and concerns of Africana thought one must engage the [European] tradition that accompanied [Africana thought's] emergence in the modern world. **Africana thought always presupposes other kinds of thought, whereas European thought often denies the existence of those beyond its own.**”<sup>3</sup>

Scholars of Africana political thought claim US black thinkers as their own, even as they acknowledge differences in emphasis and idiom between African American and other areas of Africana political thought (African, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Brazilian, Afro-British, etc.). At the same time, scholars of Africana political thought stress that all its different subareas share transnational, diasporic consciousness. All participate in what Paul Gilroy famously called “the black Atlantic.”<sup>4</sup> The experience of modern Atlantic black subjects—whether located in Accra, London, Kingston, São Paulo, or New York—was shaped and informed by news and events occurring elsewhere in a world of commerce in which the slave trade and slave agriculture were central. This too shaped the long arc of African American political thinking as US blacks contemplated and theorized the connection between their domination and the domination of darker peoples around the world.<sup>5</sup> Thus the experience of modern Atlantic black subjects was fundamentally

3 Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 31.

4 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

5 A sample of this scholarship on black internationalism in the context of African American thinking and practices includes Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Michael Hanchard, *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Manning Marable and Vanessa Agard-Jones, eds., *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon, *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Alvin B. Tillery Jr., *Between Homeland and Motherland: Africa, U.S. Foreign Policy, and Black Leadership in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Adam Dahl,

informed by transnational networks of resistance: reports of revolution spreading from Port-au-Prince to Charleston in the late 1700s, for example, or African anticolonial texts such as *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) becoming mainstays of black power politics in late-1960s Oakland. This is why Gilroy asks us to think of the black Atlantic through the “organizing symbol” of “ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean.”<sup>6</sup> This symbol of “ships in motion” is similarly fitting for Africana political thought.

Scholars of American political thought increasingly include black thinkers within their conceptualization of the field. Six of the fifty chapters in Bryan-Paul Frost and Jeffrey Sikkenga’s (largely Straussian)<sup>7</sup> *History of American Political Thought* (second edition, 2019) are dedicated to African American thinkers.<sup>8</sup> So are 14 of the 150 articles published in the journal *American Political Thought* from its inception in 2012 to the close of 2019.<sup>9</sup> Though these numbers are not insignif-

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“The Black American Jacobins: Revolution, Radical Abolition, and the Transnational Turn,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 3 (2017): 633–46; Juliet Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

6 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 4.

7 Two points to note about the invocation of Straussianism. First, the term denotes a set of “research methods, common conceptions, theoretical presuppositions, central questions, and pedagogic style characteristic of the large number of conservatives who have been influenced by the thought and teaching of Leo Strauss (1899–1973)” (see Mark C. Henrie, “Straussianism,” *First Principles: ISI Web Journal*, May 5, 2011, at <http://www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/articles.aspx?article=871>). Second, we do not deploy this term in a pejorative sense; rather, our purpose is to indicate what appears to be a set of shared norms of those writing in the *History of American Political Thought* volume.

8 Richard S. Ruderman, “‘Proclaim Liberty throughout the Land’: Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and the Abolition of Slavery”; Peter W. Schramm, “Booker T. Washington and the ‘Severe American Crucible’”; Jonathan Marks, “Co-workers in the Kingdom of Culture: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Vision of Race Synthesis”; Peter C. Meyers, “The Two Revolutions of Martin Luther King, Jr.”; Lucas E. Morel, “Malcolm X: From Apolitical Acolyte to Political Preacher”; Bradley C. S. Wilson, “The Jurisprudence of William Joseph Brennan, Jr., and Thurgood Marshall”; Jeffrey Sikkenga, “‘Yes, We Can’: The Progressive Political Thought of Barack Obama,” in *History of American Political Thought*, 2nd ed., ed. Bryan-Paul Frost and Jeffrey Sikkenga (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), chaps. 21, 27, 28, 40, 41, 47, 50.

9 Peter C. Myers, “Frederick Douglass on Revolution and Integration: A Problem in Moral Psychology,” *American Political Thought* [hereafter *APT*], 2, no. 1 (2013): 118–46; Nicholas Buccola, “‘The Essential Dignity of Man as Man’: Frederick Douglass on Human Dignity,” *APT* 4, no. 2 (2015): 228–58; Paul E. Kirkland, “Sorrow Songs and Self-Knowledge: The Politics of Recognition and Tragedy in W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*,” *APT* 4, no. 3 (2015): 412–37; Paul Schumaker, “John Rawls, Barack Obama, and the Pluralist Political Consensus,” *APT* 5, no. 4 (2016): 628–57; Adam M. Carrington, “Constructed for Liberty: Justice Clarence Thomas’s Understanding of Separation of Powers,” *APT* 5, no. 4 (2016): 658–85; Simon Stow, “American Skin: Bruce Springsteen, Danielle Allen, and the Politics of Interracial Friendship,” *APT* 6, no. 2 (2017): 294–316; Gregory M. Collins, “Beyond Politics and Natural Law: The Anticipation of New Originalist Tenets in the Constitutional Thought of Frederick Douglass,” *APT* 6, no. 4 (2017): 574–609; Patrick Allit, “Buckley, Baldwin, and the Decline of Conservative Racism,” *APT* 6, no. 4 (2017): 616–23; Susan McWilliams, “On the Faiths of (and in) Our Fathers: American Men and American Dreams in the Baldwin-Buckley Debate,” *APT* 6, no. 4 (2017): 624–31; Nicholas Buccola, “‘We Are Human, Too’: On James Baldwin’s Politics of Dignity,” *APT* 6, no. 4 (2017): 641–47;

icant, they fail to sufficiently pluralize the field's center of gravity. Moreover, they do not reflect the enormity of the problems that the United States continues to face regarding the status of black citizens. The chapters and articles in this sample also focus disproportionately on such thinkers as Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr., who are easily but misleadingly encompassed within traditional conceptions of natural-rights liberalism and the American Creed. Too often scholars of American political thought fold black thinkers into their preexisting conceptualizations of American political thought without asking whether those conceptualizations are adequate to the thinkers in question or in need of change in order to capture both what those thinkers are saying and what they are revealing about the United States. Often the focus on these thinkers obscures the complicated rhetorical frameworks in which their philosophies are located—frameworks that often reconfigure traditional themes. As we will later argue, including black thinkers within the study of American political thought requires us to recast the very terms of study, to reconstitute our understanding of American political thought itself. Broadening and deepening our conception of the African American tradition of American political thought revolutionizes the study of American political thought as a whole: it pluralizes our sense of what kinds of political stances and argumentative outlooks count as American, and it moves the primary concerns of African American political thought—racial slavery, white supremacy, gendered violence—to the center of a field of inquiry traditionally focused on federalism, natural rights, constitutional law, and popular sovereignty.

#### **Interpreting African American Political Thought: The Dawson–Gooding–Williams Debate**

Now that we've mapped African American political thought as a distinct field of study lying at the geographic intersection of Western, Africana, and American political thought, the question becomes how best intellectually to approach it. Within our home discipline of political science, there have been two predominant schools of thought over the past two decades.

The first is the Dawson school—epitomized in Michael C. Dawson's magisterial *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (2001). Dawson frames his study as an inquiry into the ideological currents of US black public opinion. He divides African American political thought into six

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Eddie S. Glaude Jr., "William F. Buckley Jr. and James Baldwin Today," *APT* 6, no. 4 (2017): 665–70; Alvin B. Tillery Jr., "Reading Tocqueville behind the Veil: African American Reception of Democracy in America, 1835–1900," *APT* 7, no. 1 (2018): 1–25; James M. Patterson, "A Covenant of the Heart: Martin Luther King Jr., Civil Disobedience, and the Beloved Community," *APT* 7, no. 1 (2018): 124–51; Giorgi Areshidze, "A Faith-Friendly Form of Rawls' 'Public Reason'? Barack Obama's Civic Faith and the Challenge of Religion in Deliberative Politics," *APT* 7, no. 2 (2018): 304–36; Brian Danoff, "*Invisible Man* and Democratic Leadership," *APT* 8, no. 1 (2019): 54–81; David Jenkins, "James Baldwin and Recognition," *APT* 8, no. 1 (2019): 82–107.



main ideologies—black nationalism, black feminism, black Marxism, and three varieties of black liberalism: radical egalitarianism, disillusioned liberalism, and black conservatism. He acknowledges that this taxonomy of six ideologies is not all inclusive (Pan-Africanism, for instance, is an extant African American ideology not analyzed in his study). He also acknowledges that the ideologies are rough-and-ready analytical categories, far from hermetically sealed (Du Bois, for example, is a radical egalitarian, disillusioned liberal, and black Marxist at different points in his career). Nevertheless, Dawson insists that “these ideologies, and the discourses around them, form the core of black political thought.” The study of individual thinkers and broader trends in black public opinion, he argues, should go hand in hand. The aim is to trace changes in black ideologies not by focusing “on only a few canonical texts or authors” but by understanding “how various concepts were used within various black activist and grassroots communities.” One of Dawson’s most important insights is the tight connection between “ideological debate and political mobilization”—between word and deed—in African American political debate:

Within black political thought, the distinction between the “contemplative” and “active” life has been neither a luxury most black intellectuals could historically afford nor one that made pragmatic or philosophical sense to the activists and intellectuals who were developing, debating, codifying, and implementing the ideologies which are at the core of black political thought. Black public spaces, the black *polis*, has been historically constituted by those engaged in *both* the creation of speech and action. Indeed, the worthiness of black political speech has often been judged by the claims of the speaker to have engaged in political action.<sup>10</sup>

Dawson has many adherents in his ideological approach to African American political thought—Melissa Harris-Perry, Christopher S. Parker, and Alvin B. Tillery Jr. among the most prominent.<sup>11</sup>

Admittedly, Dawson’s approach is not unprecedented. Philosophers and historians of African American thought have long used ideological frameworks—assimilationist/integrationist versus separatist / black nationalist, for example—to think through the meaning and complexities of the tradition. Cornel West, for example, deploys these categories in his *Prophesy Deliverance!* (1982) to understand the African American intellectual landscape. Reflecting on the debates and con-

<sup>10</sup> Dawson, *Black Visions*, 2, 8, 10, 53. Cf. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 34–36, where Collins emphasizes the “dialogical relationship” between thought and action in black women’s struggle.

<sup>11</sup> Melissa Victoria Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America: For Colored Girls Who’ve Considered Politics When Being Strong Isn’t Enough* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Tillery, “Reading Tocqueville behind the Veil.”

licts internal to the 1865 National Equal Rights League Convention that endorsed full and immediate citizenship for African Americans, August Meier captures the waxing and waning of these two ideological positions during Reconstruction:

Yet the appeal for racial solidarity [made at the Convention] smacked of self-segregation, of a sort of nationalism, of furthering the system of “color caste.” This paradox is one of the central themes in American Negro thought on the race problem. The outlook of the Reconstruction period was primarily integrationist, for it was a period when there was much sympathy and support among whites for the Negro cause and the passage of concrete legislation assuring Negroes of their citizenship rights. Later, as conditions took a turn for the worse, the theme of self-help and solidarity again assumed a major role.<sup>12</sup>

Although Meier centered black thinkers in his analysis and served as an important intellectual voice for African American history and thinking, the result, not unlike West’s intervention, inevitably flattened out the internal philosophical diversity among thinkers. The significant difference, of course, between Dawson’s newer approach and the earlier reflections by philosophers and historians is in pluralizing the ideological postures internal to this tradition.

The second major school of thought is the Gooding-Williams school—epitomized in Robert Gooding-Williams’s meticulous *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (2009). *In the Shadow of Du Bois* argues that Afro-modern political thought constitutes a distinct genre of political philosophy comparable to the social contract genre from Hobbes to Rawls and the nineteenth-century French liberal genre from Barante to Tocqueville. Encompassing figures ranging from Cugoana to Douglass to Fanon, “the Afro-modern tradition is bound together by certain genre-defining preoccupations—for example, the political and social organization of white supremacy, the nature and effects of racial ideology, and the possibilities of black emancipation.”<sup>13</sup> Afro-modern political thought is a variant of Africana political thought but is less focused on pre-fifteenth-century African thought systems and more specifically focused on Afro-diasporic responses to the cataclysms of colonial conquest and New World slavery since the fifteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

12 Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1982), especially chap. 3; August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 8.

13 Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 3. In conceptualizing the Afro-modern tradition, Gooding-Williams builds on Robinson, *Black Marxism*; Frank Kirkland, “Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black,” *Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992–93): 136–65; Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” *Public Culture* 11 (Winter 1999): 245–68; and Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 258n6.

14 For discussion of pre-fifteenth-century Africana thought, see Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 23–28, 186–90.

*In the Shadow of Du Bois* offers a respectful critique of Dawson's ideological approach to African American political thought. Though Gooding-Williams compliments Dawson for taking the conceptual mapping beyond the assimilationist-separatist dualism, Gooding-Williams ultimately calls on scholars to move beyond the practice of ideological categorization itself. Scholarship in African American political thought should not focus on identifying the "correct" category for "subsuming" the political thought of any given individual thinker. Neither should the aim be "to elaborate a new and even more discriminating scheme of classification than . . . Dawson provides." Rather, we should embrace "a healthy skepticism with respect to the adequacy of any such scheme." Gooding-Williams analyzes the two main subjects of his study—Douglass and Du Bois—by highlighting "the scheme-exceeding complexity and specificity" of their thought. Gooding-Williams embeds this explanation of his methodological approach within a broader call for scholars of Afro-modern political thought to treat the tradition's writings "as complicated, nuanced, and argued statements of political thought demanding just the sort of attentive reading and probing analysis that we have been accustomed to give works like Aristotle's *Politics*, Locke's *Second Treatise*, and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*."<sup>15</sup> The Gooding-Williams school has an increasing number of subscribers—Lawrie Balfour, Stephen H. Marshall, Nick Bromell, Shatema Threatcraft, Tommie Shelby, and Brandon Terry among them.<sup>16</sup>

Two qualifications of our portrait of the Dawson–Gooding-Williams debate are in order. First, Gooding-Williams's approach does not preclude the possibility of identifying and studying distinct intellectual traditions to which black thinkers belong. Wilson Jeremiah Moses's and William L. Van Deburg's pioneering studies on black nationalism reveal that despite a variety of differences among the thinkers they study, that thinking nonetheless expresses something called black nationalism.<sup>17</sup> There is a thread that runs through David Walker, Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell, Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X that binds them together into a distinct ideological formation. This too is often the case with European thinkers, with a variety of figures being grouped under the umbrella of something

<sup>15</sup> Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 6–7.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Lawrie Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Stephen H. Marshall, *The City on the Hill from Below: The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Nick Bromell, *The Time Is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of US Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Shatema Threatcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, eds., *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press [1978] 1988); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, ed., *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); William L. Van Deburg, ed., *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

called Enlightenment while others fit under the heading of something called Romanticism.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Gooding-Williams rightly encourages us to take heed and be mindful of the ways ideological framings often flatten the complex and rich terrain of individual intellectual visions.

Second, significant though the differences between Dawson and Gooding-Williams are, their interpretive approaches are not mutually exclusive. They are two different levels of analysis—the first a bird’s-eye view of major clusters of political ideology and an account of how different thinkers relate to those clusters, the second a more microscopic view that still keeps historical contexts and ideological mappings in mind. Those seeking to tell the story of African American political thought would do well to remember the lessons of both.

But while Dawson’s attention to ideological context and his call to analyze the tight connection between speech and action inform the present volume, we generally take Gooding-Williams’s interpretive approach. Thus our organization of the thirty chapters around thirty different individual thinkers. We build on Gooding-Williams’s intervention by emulating it in reference to twenty-eight thinkers beyond Douglass and Du Bois (though we, of course, have chapters on them too). All of the chapters make questions of ideological categorization secondary—including Dawson’s own chapter 11 on Marcus Garvey. We concur with Gooding-Williams that scholars of African American political thought need to counterbalance the ideological approach that Dawson, Robinson, Collins, and Boxill popularized with more intensive attention to the intellectual particularities of individual thinkers. The present volume provides thirty profiles of intellectual particularity, all the while stimulating in the reader, we hope, a deep desire to see connections and lines of inquiry across these thinkers.

### Reconstituting American Political Thought

As the previous sections make clear, this book’s first major intervention is elaborating a thinker-centered account of African American political thought. But this first major intervention involves a second major intervention: the reconstitution of American political thought itself.

The trailblazing black historian Nathan I. Huggins always insisted that African American history is American history, that researching and narrating the story of black Americans automatically entails revising our historical understanding of the United States at large.<sup>19</sup> Studying slavery in colonial Virginia, for example, forces us to revise our understanding of the sources of American ideas of free-

<sup>18</sup> For example, see Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966/1969); M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

<sup>19</sup> Nathan I. Huggins, “Integrating Afro-American History into American History,” in *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 157–68.

dom. Those sources were not only the minds of Harrington, Sydney, Locke, and Montesquieu but also the lived experience of slavery. As Edmund Morgan observed, the “presence of men and women” who were “almost totally subject to the will of other men” gave slaveowners like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison “an immediate experience of what it could mean to be at the mercy of a tyrant. Virginians may have had a special appreciation of the freedom dear to republicans, because they saw every day what life without it could be like.”<sup>20</sup> On the basis of revisionist histories such as Morgan’s, Huggins concluded, “Afro-American history and American history are not only essential to one another. They share a common historical fate.”<sup>21</sup>

African American political thought and American political thought are also essential to one another and share a common historical fate. This is not to say that African American political thought is not also a part of Africana and Western political thought. It is simply to say that African American political thought is bound up with the distinctive idioms and touchstones of US national experience. Think of David Walker’s reinterpretation of the Declaration of Independence as a warrant for black emancipation and coequal citizenship, for example, or Ida B. Wells’s creative appropriation of the US rhetoric of self-help to justify collective black armed self-defense against lynching.<sup>22</sup> When black thinkers speak from their distinctive standpoints on US national experiences and ideals, they decenter hegemonic white interpretations, lay claim to their own interpretive authority, and put new interpretations of nationhood into circulation.<sup>23</sup> Thus they open up the possibility of reconstituting US citizens’ self-understanding.

One powerful example of the reconstituting potential of African American political thought is W. E. B. Du Bois’s revisionist narrative of emancipation in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935). Against the background of the American myth that black Americans were passive (and unprepared) recipients of a freedom dispensed by Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, Du Bois’s chapter on

20 Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 376.

21 Huggins, “Integrating Afro-American History,” 160–61. See also David W. Blight, “In Retrospect: Nathan Irvin Huggins, the Art of History, and the Irony of the American Dream” (1994), in *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 258–77, and Jeffrey B. Ferguson, “Freedom, Equality, Race,” *Daedalus* 140, no. 1 (2011): 44–52.

22 David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park: Penn State University Press, [1829] 2000), 75–76; Melvin L. Rogers, “David Walker and the Political Power of the Appeal,” *Political Theory* 43, no. 2 (2015): 208–33; Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), in *The Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, ed. Trudier Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 40–45; Lawrie Balfour, “Ida B. Wells and ‘Color Line Justice’: Rethinking Reparations in Feminist Terms,” *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 3 (2015): 680–96.

23 On the political significance of claiming one’s own interpretive authority, see Nolan Bennett, *The Claims of Experience: Autobiography and American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

the general strike spotlights the mass political action of black southerners more than a year before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Masses of enslaved people stopped work on Confederate plantations, ran to Union lines, labored for the Union cause, and lobbied to take up arms against the Confederacy. Du Bois's retelling of the story not only gives credit where credit is due to the African Americans who seized their own freedom, but helps to explain why Lincoln recognized the pivotal importance of black labor to winning the war, and so accelerated his plans for emancipation. It also reconstitutes our understanding of emancipation itself as a social process partly—if not largely—driven by the initiative of the enslaved. Lincoln emerges not as a heroic herald of freedom but as a political actor caught between the demands of preserving the Union, the need to appease antiabolitionist northerners, and the opportunities created by enslaved southerners who put their labor and fighting power into play. Because Lincoln decided to take advantage of the critically important labor and military service offered by African Americans, he could frame emancipation as a military necessity and deflect criticism from antiabolitionist northerners supportive of a Union war but opposed to an abolition one. Du Bois's retelling highlights the crucial role of black agency in the second American founding. It recasts US history as a cocreation (though an asymmetric one) of black and white actors. Finally, it is crucial to note that although Du Bois's revisionist history was found implausible by the white historical establishment when it appeared, it anticipated by more than half a century today's scholarly consensus that emancipation was a complex social process, partly—if not largely—driven by the political actions of enslaved people themselves.<sup>24</sup>

African American political thought reconstitutes not only key narratives of US national history but also the key concepts shaping US citizens' political self-understanding. It does not simply appropriate preexisting concepts in US political thought—e.g., freedom, equality, and “the people”—and then apply them mechanically to the lives of black people. Rather, African American political thought adapts these concepts to the contexts and conditions of black life, and in so doing reconfigures and refines them.<sup>25</sup> As Neil Roberts shows in chapter 28, Angela

24 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Touchstone [1935] 1995), 55–83; Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); David W. Blight, “W. E. B. Du Bois and American Historical Memory” (1994), in *Beyond the Battlefield*, 223–57; Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), chap. 2; Balfour, *Democracy's Reconstruction*, chap. 2.

25 On conceptual reconfiguration, see Michael Hanchard, “Contours of Black Political Thought: An Introduction and Perspective,” *Political Theory* 38, no. 4 (2010): 512–516. For examples of black conceptual reconfiguration in relation to concepts of individualism, democracy, universalism, self-determination, and republicanism, see—respectively—Jack Turner, *Awakening*

Davis's idea of freedom is an example of this sort of conceptual reconfiguration. Whereas Euro-American political thinkers in the natural rights tradition from Paine and Jefferson to Lincoln and Stanton understood freedom as humanity's baseline condition from which unfreedom deviates, Davis convinces us to imagine unfreedom as our baseline condition and freedom as the activity of resisting that condition. Not only does Davis's reconceptualization better reflect Afro-modern experience, but it also recasts the nominal freedom of oppressors as a passive state of privilege. In effect, it implies that the freedom of the oppressor is undesirable (1) because it is parasitic on the unfreedom of the oppressed and is therefore contingent on an inegalitarian form of social identity and (2) because it is decadent, for it is removed from the motion, risk, and exhilaration of resistance and revolution. Davis, on Roberts's interpretation, makes struggle and activity freedom's defining qualities, while proposing that passive enjoyment of the pleasures of privilege is free only within the corrupt framework of white supremacy. Davis resignifies freedom and challenges both black and nonblack audiences to abandon Euro-American concepts of freedom for the notion of "freedom as marronage."<sup>26</sup> The merits of this conceptualization—and its relationship to Euro-American conceptualizations—are, of course, subject to debate.<sup>27</sup> The point is that Davis's conceptualization of freedom is not Stanton's or Lincoln's or even Arendt's applied to a new context. It is a different way of theorizing freedom.

The stakes of the claim that careful study of African American political thought cannot help but revise prevailing understandings of American political thought are more than academic. In her landmark essay "Redeeming American Political Theory," based on her 1990 presidential address at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Judith Shklar argued that a defining feature of American political experience was "the prevalence of chattel slavery long after it had disappeared from the rest of the world":

Not racism—which is universal—but *slavery* in a modern constitutional state is truly unique. Until the Civil War amendments America was neither a liberal nor a democratic country, whatever its citizens might have believed. Yet it did have in place a set of institutions that were capable of becoming so and to an unequaled degree.

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to *Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), chaps. 3–6; Bromell, *Time Is Always Now*; Adom Getachew, "Universalism after the Post-colonial Turn," *Political Theory* 44, no. 6 (2016): 821–45; Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Melvin Rogers, "Race, Domination, and Republicanism," in *Difference without Domination: On Justice and Democracy in Conditions of Diversity*, ed. Danielle Allen and Rohini Somanathan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*. See also Barnor Hesse, "Escaping Liberty: Western Hegemony, Black Fugitivity," *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 288–313.

<sup>27</sup> For a critique of Roberts on this score, see Jack Turner, "Democracy, Freedom, and Afro-Modern Political Thought," *Contemporary Political Theory* 16, no. 4 (2017): 532–40.

This country had embarked upon two experiments simultaneously: one in democracy, the other in tyranny.<sup>28</sup>

Because of its sharp focus on the life and afterlife of slavery, African American political thought brings the American experience of tyranny into sharp relief. Nowhere is this better illustrated in this volume than in Robert Gooding-Williams's interpretation of Martin Delany in chapter 3. According to Gooding-Williams, Delany believed that slaves and antebellum free blacks alike were subject to "a shared *political* servitude where free blacks and chattel slaves alike take no part in government, benefit from no true representation, and have whatever rights and privileges they have due to the 'sufferance' and discretion of their rulers. Delany conceptualizes racial oppression as a form of what republican and neorepublican political theory dubs 'domination'—that is, as subjection to arbitrary rule."<sup>29</sup> On the basis of his diagnosis of the US regime as one of racial domination tout court, Delany advocated that black people in the US emigrate to Central America, South America, the West Indies, or Africa, and that they establish an independent black nation. The United States was unlikely to become a land of universal liberty, in his eyes, because its general political culture was not democratically egalitarian but racially tyrannical. In Gooding-Williams's words, Delany held that "the prejudices that custom and law entrench and stabilize are so stubborn in their persistence, so fundamentally ingrained in the ethos of America's white citizens, that the fulfillment of blacks' shared political desire is extremely unlikely while they remain in the United States." Delany voices a racial pessimism that later black nationalist thinkers from Marcus Garvey to Malcolm X would adopt. Thus he and his black nationalist heirs offer a window onto America that directly challenges the view of the US as the site of a liberal consensus—a view that Louis Hartz made famous with his 1955 *The Liberal Tradition in America*.<sup>30</sup> Delany's America is a case study in tyranny as much as it is in liberty. Taking Delany seriously means taking seriously the possibility that America is racially tyrannical at heart.

28 Judith Shklar, "Redeeming American Political Theory" (1991), in *Redeeming American Political Thought*, ed. Stanley Hoffman and Dennis F. Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 92. Cf. Dawson, *Black Visions*, 14: "A central theme within black political thought has been . . . to insist that the question of racial injustice is a central problematic in American political thought and practice, not a minor problem that can be dismissed in parentheses and footnotes."

29 For an innovative discussion of black republicanism as a popular political ideology, see Parker, *Fighting for Democracy*, chap. 2.

30 Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, [1955] 1991). For a review essay that nicely summarizes Hartz's position and the challenges and alternatives addressed to it, see Marc Stears, "The Liberal Tradition and the Politics of Exclusion," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 85–101. See also Rogers Smith, "The 'Liberal Tradition' and American Racism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Racial and Ethnic Politics in the United States*, ed. David L. Leal, Taeku Lee, and Markn Sawyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, online publication date October 2016), DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566631.013.13.



Reconstituting American political thought through African American political thought, however, need not always lead to racial pessimist conclusions. As Carol Wayne White shows in chapter 8 on Anna Julia Cooper, America sometimes emerges from black political thinking as a site of chastened hope and potential democracy. Against the background of her “politics of radical relationality—in which the fate of each individual (or the one) is inextricably connected to all (or the many),” Cooper envisioned America as “an unfolding cultural sphere where ‘regenerating’ and ‘vitalizing’ forces were at work—a ‘relational whole’ advancing in growth and perfection for all its constituents.” This democratic perfectionist vision of America, according to White, formed the basis of Cooper’s prophetic critique: “Cooper insisted that unless, and until, black women and men (and other marginalized groups) could prosper and participate fully in the rich unfolding of America, it would not actualize itself.” White’s Cooper offers a vital democratic perfectionist perspective on racial injustice largely missing from the work of major Euro-American democratic perfectionist counterparts such as Emerson, Dewey, and Cavell.<sup>31</sup> Cooper’s elevation in the canon of American political thought holds out the possibility of reconstituting our understanding of American democratic perfectionism for the better not only by making the democratic perfectionist canon more racially inclusive but also by equipping that tradition of thought to respond more adequately to racial injustice.

Living in a house not built for you is difficult to do. Uneasiness becomes a constant companion. African Americans know this all too well: “Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?”<sup>32</sup> One is always asking, as Toni Morrison did: “[Can] I redecorate, redesign, even reconceive the racial house without forfeiting a home of my own?”<sup>33</sup> In placing the accent on reconstituting American political thought, then, we are under no illusions about the uneasy relationship between African American political thought and the tradition we see all of these figures reimagining. We proceed on the assumption, because it is entailed by their writings, that African American political thinkers more often than not treat the conceptual field of American political and cultural life as a site of symbolic action, in Ralph Ellison’s sense of that term.<sup>34</sup> The signifiers are not hermetically sealed, nor are the concepts resistant to refashioning and reconsti-

31 On the relationship between democratic perfectionism and black life, see Robert Gooding-Williams, “Aesthetics and Receptivity: Kant, Nietzsche, Cavell, and Astaire,” in *Look, a Negro! Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 43–67, and Eddie S. Glaude Jr., “James Baldwin and Black Lives Matter,” in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 361–72.

32 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (orig. 1903; Boston: Bedford / St. Martin’s, 1997), 38.

33 Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 4.

34 Ralph Ellison, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station: The American Artist and His Audience” (1977–78), in *Going to the Territory* (1986), in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 502.

tuting their political and ethical power. The house can be more than the reasons for which it was built; spaces can be repurposed, what was once strange may come to seem familiar, and new relationships may emerge in light of the redesign. In thinking of the conceptual field in just this way, the problems of white supremacy, racism, patriarchy, inequality, and domination that are often taken up in this book function as significant, but not by any means exclusive, features of American political thought. In treating African American political thought as both standing in and exceeding American political thought, we transform the parameters and possibilities of the latter.

This volume will be successful in its effort to help reconstitute American political thought if it leads teachers and students to see Delany, Cooper, and Davis as equally emblematic of US political thought as Jefferson, Stanton, and Reagan. Interweaving African American political thought into the history of American political thought will make the latter more historically accurate as well as more philosophically interesting.

### Democratizing Democratic Theory

As previously suggested, we believe that there are transformative insights to be had when we think about American political thought through the animating concerns of African American political thought. We also suspect similar results when we place democratic theory in conversation with this tradition.

Two years after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Waldo Ellison penned the following lines for *Time*: “The fantasy of an America free of blacks is at least as old as the dream of creating a truly democratic society. While we are aware that there is something inescapably tragic about the cost of achieving our democratic ideals, we keep such tragic awareness segregated in the rear of our minds. We allow it to come to the fore only during moments of great national crisis.”<sup>35</sup> Even as Ellison observed the persistence of this fantasy—this desire for a blackless America—he continued to yoke together “America” and “democracy” in the service of a racially just society. This was an odd occurrence; Martin was gone, Malcolm five years earlier from the time of Ellison’s article, and the soil of America was drenched in the blood of black people and their allies. And yet Ellison, not unlike many in the tradition facing the violence of white supremacy, believed African Americans by virtue of their struggle had something to teach American democracy.

Were one to examine mainstream democratic theory for lessons learned from black political thought, one would find little to report. Despite the flourishing of normative reflections on democracy, few locate African American political thinking and activism at the center of analysis. Specifically, we mean those who turn to

35 Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like without Blacks” (1970), in *Going to the Territory*, in *Collected Essays*, 577.

the tradition of “Western” political philosophy to theorize democracy in America but ignore that many of those who have something to offer are nonwhites facing the persistent denial of the goods democracy promises. As Brandon Terry observes in chapter 26, the lacuna is surprising given that much of the discussion of “participatory democracy” of the late 1970s and 1980s and its descendant deliberative democracy of the 1990s grows out of the grassroots struggles and thinking of black people in the 1960s and 1970s. For this reason, it is worth asking how African American political thought could intervene in our thinking about democracy. To begin an answer, we need to first say a word about democratic theorizing.

There are, we think, at least **three dominant approaches** (there may be more) in democratic theory that are transformed by engaging African American political thought.<sup>36</sup> The first envisions democracy as exclusively a power play of interests, aggregation of preferences, and electoral competition.<sup>37</sup> The second approach turns away from the individualistic basis of democracy and market driven ideas about politics toward discussion or deliberation as a means for understanding opinion and will-formation. Deliberative democracy probes the very formation of interests and preferences in the first place and insists that collective decision-making be achieved through discussion, with the understanding that those individuals and groups whose interests are most likely affected should be included.<sup>38</sup> This approach thus legitimizes democratic practices in ways that extend beyond mere electoral competition and voting. The third, though having longer historical roots, is nonetheless of recent normative variety: neorepublicanism. This tradition theorizes the meaning of freedom through the lens of nondomination. To be free is, on this view, to not be at the arbitrary mercy of institutional processes and public officials. Thus freedom depends on a democracy (a) imposing constitutional constraints that guard against arbitrary power and (b) providing institutional spaces that allow citizens contestatory power to ensure the proper functioning of a constitutional order.<sup>39</sup>

36 The reader should treat this line as an invitation to think and explore other approaches to democratic theorizing that may be enriched by interacting with African American political thought.

37 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, [1942] 1950); Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), and *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

38 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1985), and *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg (Oxford: Polity, 1998); Joshua Cohen, “Procedure and Substance in Deliberative Democracy,” in *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 95–119, and “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy,” in *Deliberative Democracy*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 67–93.

39 Quentin Skinner, “Machiavelli on the Maintenance of Liberty,” *Politics* 18 (1983): 3–15; “The Idea of Negative Liberty,” in *Philosophy of History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Q. Skinner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 193–221; “The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty,” in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. G. Bock, Q. Skinner, and M. Viroli (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 239–309; and *Liberty*

African American political struggles have often been defined by the quest for the franchise. The right and free ability to vote was a tool of power and a material manifestation of one's equal standing in society and one's equal capacity to shape the direction of the political community. In the nineteenth century especially, the vote was central to democracy's proper functioning and one's place within a democratic society. Writing in 1865, five years before the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment, Frederick Douglass powerfully captured the point:

By depriving us of suffrage, you affirm our incapacity to form an intelligent judgment respecting public men and public measures; you declare before the world that we are unfit to exercise the elective franchise, and by this means lead us to undervalue ourselves, to put a low estimate upon ourselves, and to feel that we have no possibilities like other men. Again, I want the elective franchise, for one, as a colored man, because ours is a peculiar government, based upon a peculiar idea, and that idea is universal suffrage.<sup>40</sup>

Here, Douglass speaks only of men, but we hear this claim voiced by black women within the tradition, albeit with a significant caveat. "Only the BLACK WOMAN," wrote Anna Julia Cooper in 1892, "can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*.'"<sup>41</sup> Rejecting what we now see as the great race man paradigm that Cooper specifically detected in Martin Delany, she defended the embodied character of black womanhood (see chapter 8, by White) and therefore the necessity of the ballot to push back against the idea that somehow black men could serve as the proxy for black women. "Whatever the attainments of the individual may be," she explained, "unless his home has moved on *pari passu*, he can never be regarded as identical with or representative of the whole."<sup>42</sup> Despite the differences between Delany, Douglass, and Cooper, they all would have agreed with Martin Luther King Jr.: "Give us the ballot, and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights."<sup>43</sup> Within a century of Douglass's reflections, the

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*before Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and *Just Freedom: A Moral Compass for a Complex World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

40 Frederick Douglass, "What the Black Man Wants" (1865), in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, series 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 4:63.

41 Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (1892), in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 63.

42 Cooper, *Voice*, 63 (original emphasis). Cf. Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 4–6.

43 Martin Luther King Jr., "Give Us the Ballot" (1957), in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 4:210.

Voting Rights Act of 1965 made true the words of the Fifteenth Amendment. The Voting Rights Act expressed an otherwise deeply held belief—namely, that the franchise (a) was a means to engage in the power play of American politics and (b) affirmed one's equal standing. It was, in other words, a way of having one's preferences articulated, tracked, and potentially instantiated in the laws that governed society.

But if African Americans stressed the importance of the franchise in one sense, they envisioned the political landscape as susceptible to preference transformation and believed the life of democracy extended beyond the formal process of voting in another. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated in this volume than in Melvin Rogers's reflections on David Walker (chapter 2), Danielle Allen's careful reading of Ralph Ellison (chapter 20), and Lawrie Balfour's interpretation of Toni Morrison (chapter 24). Writing against the backdrop of slavery, Walker encouraged his black readers and listeners to understand their political standing through their capacity to judge, regardless of formal affirmation. He encouraged them to see their capacity for judgment as capable of giving life to and forming counternarratives about their interests, preferences, and desires—in short, how they should be understood. But beyond the development of a collective self-understanding among black people, counternarratives put in circulation ideas about black people and ways of seeing them that disrupted dominant negative descriptions. This was an enduring feature of African American political thought, not only informing the production of the first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal* of 1827, but shaping the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts movement that developed in the middle of the 1960s. These were political projects that conceived those without the power of the franchise as nonetheless capable of intervening in and transforming the public discourse about black people.<sup>44</sup>

And it is precisely this sense of putting ideas in circulation and shaping public discourse that marks the unique intervention of African American thinkers such as Ellison and Morrison. Both presuppose democracy as a cultural enterprise, and

44 All three of these periods—the emergence of the early black press, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Arts movement—are important for understanding a form of politics that circulates outside the “traditional” beltway of American politics. For some signature texts that explore this theme, see Todd Vogel, ed., *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom's Journal: The First African American Newspaper* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); Nathan Huggins, *The Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1981); George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance In Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, ed., *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2010); James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in African American History and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Cheryl Clarke, “After Mecca”: *Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

as Allen and Balfour argue separately, each provides narratives in which citizens come to see the fragility of their standing and the necessity of dependence. And both force readers to grapple with the daily pressure democracy places on each citizen to affirm the equal standing of his or her fellows. What Ellison and Morrison share with Walker—indeed what runs throughout the tradition—is the sense that while the formal practices of democracy such as voting matter, it is a mistake to treat democracy merely as a form rather than a way of life that extends well beyond the voting booths. In the thinkers discussed throughout this volume such as Cooper (chapter 8, by White), Du Bois (chapter 10, by Paul Taylor), Baldwin (chapter 21, by John Drabinski), and West (chapter 30, by Mark Wood), we get a clear sense that democratic life is distorted precisely because the devaluation of black lives saturates the culture of American life. For these thinkers, the place and practice of voting is located within a wider field of disregard that must be addressed. A style of theorizing democracy that exclusively focuses on the franchise and the equality it represents is likely to miss the necessary preparatory work that African American political thought insists is necessary to achieve equality in the first place.

One of the collateral benefits to thinking about democracy as a way of life is how it transforms our understanding of some of the constitutive features of a democratic society informed by liberal ideas regarding the rights of persons and their sovereign status. The franchise is tied to these ideas in at least two ways. First, the ability to vote is taken as a foundational right that is essential to secure all other rights we enjoy, even if who should have access to it has been contested.<sup>45</sup> Second, just as states are thought to be sovereign when they have the right to determine their own domain, individuals, at least in principle in the thinking of John Locke, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mills, and John Rawls, are thought to be masters of their domain. When democracy is considered as a way of life, rights remain important, but a much wider network is necessary for their stability. That is, rights are not, for the thinkers in this volume, self-executing but depend on a set of supports—human, economic, and political—to help sustain them. This is because rights, even when taken to be natural, still amount to statuses that one enjoys because of societal affirmation. This is largely why you will find little theorizing in this volume about rights, but a great deal of reflection on the content of societal affirmation in addressing white supremacy and practices of domination.<sup>46</sup>

45 See Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2009), and Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

46 This is not to suggest there is no discussion of rights and its place within a larger constitutional framework. For example, Daniel Moak's careful reading of Thurgood Marshall in this volume underscores an important schism in the long civil rights movement—between a focus on formal rights-based equality and segregation and the wider field of participation in and access to the economic structures of American life. See chapter 17; cf. Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). This latter view was part of a wider vision of realizing a racially just society at all levels of American life.

But just as the wider social field that is necessary to sustain rights comes into view, we also come to see the nonsovereign character of democratic citizenship.<sup>47</sup> Again and again throughout this volume, African Americans underscore that acting on their intentional choices, seeking to be who they take themselves to be, and recognizing themselves through their effect on the world are thoroughly bound up with being received or taken by their fellows in just the way they intend. White supremacy and the domination it creates is just one stark example of how African Americans are reminded of their nonsovereignty. But even in the absence of those distinct injustices, Americans perpetually depend on their fellows in ways that bear the traces of nonsovereignty. The point here is that one of the threads that tie this volume's thinkers together is a rejection of the myth of sovereignty, precisely because that myth insists on obscuring or undermining the inescapability of dependence for achieving the goods we desire. Even as African Americans struggle to lessen or remove altogether the workings of white supremacy, they nonetheless work out of and often theorize a vision of social life where dependence is both acknowledged and viewed as inescapable. The only question for them, and in turn for us, is how to nurture and cultivate a healthy form of dependence.

From Douglass to Wells to King, African American thinkers have regularly endorsed deliberation as central to democratic life and performed its function. By this we do not merely mean they have argued for the importance of discussion (it would be hard to do otherwise in defending democracy). Rather, we mean that deliberation itself has often functioned for them as a vehicle for transforming the normative commitments of the nation or, in modest cases, getting the nation to properly align itself with extant normative commitments. From Douglass's moral suasion to Wells's attempt to help the American public understand more clearly the true rationale for lynching to King's religious framing of the civil rights moment and insistence on nonviolence, each presupposed the importance of what Simone Chambers calls "the communicative processes of opinion and will-formation that precede voting."<sup>48</sup>

Importantly, however, where African American thinkers have emphasized the necessity of deliberation, they have often understood what counts as content in deliberative exchanges in radically expansive terms. From the discursive use of religious claims to the display of emotions to the performance of protest via marching and sit-ins, all of these have worked as reasons for organizing the polity one way rather than another. More significantly, they all have served as features of "deliberation" that move in and beyond the traditional mode of speaking to another. The reader should follow this point with care. What we are suggesting

47 For a sharp general discussion of the nonsovereign character of democratic citizenship, see Sharon R. Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). In chapter 5 of this volume, Krause shows specifically how the conception of freedom at work in the political thought of Frederick Douglass is nonsovereign.

48 Simone Chambers, "Deliberative Democratic Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 6 (2003): 308.

here is that even in cases where black folks were not *talking*, they were nonetheless *speaking* to the public, asking it to critically consider whether the violence being visited on African Americans was the hallmark of a democratic society. Sometimes this came in the form of the mode of protest on display, and sometimes it came in a flash of anger and resentment that characterized the engagement of thinkers like Douglass, Wells, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and Audre Lorde. While it is true that deliberative democracy as a field of inquiry has undergone transformations that seemingly recognize these contributions to public life, they have largely been cast as supplemental rather than central to the expressive range of deliberative practices that African American political thought insists upon. It is not only that we need to add these features to our concept of deliberation, but that we need to embrace the expressive diversity of reason-giving, and thus transform our understanding of what counts as a reason for action.

Even when we are thinking about democracy as exceeding the workings of the franchise or filling out the richness and complexity of deliberation and its forms in the United States, there is no way to escape the disappointments to which democracy exposes us. There is a general irony here that we gestured to above. The insistence on the equal standing of persons underwrites and encourages the belief that we each are sovereign and that the only obstacle to our desire is the reach of our imagination. Yet it is often the case that our hopes are dashed, as we are reminded that we depend on those over whom we exercise no control to realize the goods we seek.<sup>49</sup> Dependence does not consistently work to support the goods we desire.

There is a standard approach to thinking about this problem. It goes something like this. The exposure to disappointment is often taken in stride: we believe that unrealized goods in one moment need not determine goods either sought or obtained in another. Frustration in society thus abounds, but it need not be a constant feature of the life we share in common. We know the workings of that shared life will frustrate our aims, but we generally see that frustration (or at least claim to see it) as part of the legitimate workings of the democratic life to which we belong. For in a society where the principle of governing and being governed in turn rules, there is no reason to believe any disappointments experienced—or even harms—will last forever or serve as harbingers of one's second-class status.

This general sketch helps us to understand a different level of disappointment and harm-exposure black people in the United States experience. It is impossible to look at the tradition of African American political thought—the entire range of thinkers—and not see that in being preoccupied with white supremacy they are fundamentally concerned with domination. They are concerned with an unspecified form of danger that shapes their lives and could intrude at any moment. Frederick Douglass referred to it as being the “slave of the community,” and through

49 On this point see Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since “Brown v. Board of Education”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Turner, *Awakening to Race*; James T. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).



the figure of Baby Suggs, Toni Morrison reminds us of how black people often live at the mercy of their white counterparts.<sup>50</sup> It is not merely, then, that African Americans experience the kinds of disappointments that come from living with others seeking similar goods located within a political system of governing and being governed in turn. Rather, it is that African Americans are exposed to forms of harm that exceed democracy's normal level of exposure. Vulnerability to harm and knowing that harm could arrive at any moment is what it means to live in a condition of racial domination.

As much as African Americans have emphasized the importance of proper functioning of democratic institutions for their safety and security, and thus agree with republicanism, they have also insisted that much more requires attention if their freedom and equal standing are to be realized. First, they understand better than republicans do the distinction between chattel slavery and political slavery. Phillis Wheatley, as we see in chapter 1 by Carreta, reflected on the real political conflict between the British Crown and the American colonies. But she was keen to point out the difference between Africans who are enslaved and those "who suffer only metaphorical 'Scourges' and chains." This is the difference between oppressors who disregard the life of those they rule because it has no meaning they can recognize and oppressors who use their power to ignore the demands of those they once acknowledged. When Douglass refers to being the slave of the community and Morrison underscores the way this condition opens black people to a unique kind of violence and violation, they both track Wheatley's earlier insight. They are asking us to consider the unique challenge chattel slavery poses to freedom, a challenge that is not easily rectified by the proposals traditionally offered by republicans or, for that matter, liberals.<sup>51</sup>

Like Wheatley in the eighteenth century, Richard Wright in the twentieth recognizes the general disregard for black life that animates American society. As Tommie Shelby explains in his powerful reading of Wright (chapter 18), the insecurity of black life in the United States often follows from "social-psychological" features of American society that insist on the inferiority of black people in relation to their white counterparts. The idea of the inferiority of black people informed chattel slavery and extended long past the legal prohibition of slavery. This idea has and continues to determine where black folks can live, what they can earn, how they are policed, and the reproductive protections they have.<sup>52</sup> Ideas

50 Douglass, "An Address to the Colored People of the United States" (1848), in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 119; Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 288.

51 But for a critique of "racial liberalism" that seeks ultimately to "deracialize" it and make it adequate to the challenge of racial injustice, see Charles W. Mills, *Black Rights / White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

52 For normative engagement with these themes see Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice*.

about black people have undergone an evolution from the belief that inferiority follows innately from the capacities of black people to the more commonly held belief that inferiority results from the cultural life black people choose to live; yet the shadow of inferiority continues to shape the context in which they live and also helps to explain citizens and policymakers' unwillingness to address their disadvantage.<sup>53</sup> All the chapters in this volume, regardless of their differences, agree that domination is not merely about being at the mercy of another—a problem that could be addressed by the proper functioning of our institutions—but often results because of the absence of proper regard extended to black people in the first place. African Americans have insisted that their white counterparts must confront this feature of American society and critically interrogate their need to regard black people as inferior, if the institutions of the United States are to deal fairly with African Americans.

Tracking the workings of racial domination carries with it an additional and significant insight. The insight follows less from the claim that racial domination is a distinct form of oppression and more from attentiveness to the positionality of persons and groups subject to racial domination. It stems, in other words, from a way of seeing that prepares the reader to observe the differential effects of domination on black men and women. Engaging the arguments of Phillis Wheatley in chapter 1 (by Carreta), Harriet Jacobs in chapter 4 (by Nick Bromell), Anna Julia Cooper in chapter 8 (by White), Ida B. Wells in chapter 9 (by Murakawa), Zora Neale Hurston in chapter 13 (by Griffin), Toni Morrison in chapter 24 (by Balfour), Audre Lorde in chapter 25 (by Jack Turner), and Angela Davis in chapter 28 (by Roberts), the reader is compelled to consider the role of gender and its relationship to white supremacy and patriarchy, even when those are not the explicit themes of the chapters. As Jacobs remarked in 1861: "Superadded to the burden common to all, [black women] have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own."<sup>54</sup> One must take great care not to extend Jacobs's claim into a rallying cry for the distinct harms experienced by black women over and against black men; rather, one must acknowledge that the distinctive reproductive capacity of black women under conditions of racial domination exposes them to a form of abuse requiring distinct forms of redress in a democratic society.<sup>55</sup>

In gesturing toward the ways attention to African American political thought

53 Glenn C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Lawrence D. Bobo, "Somewhere between Jim Crow and Post-racialism: Reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today," *Daedalus* 140 (2011): 11–36; Christopher J. Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

54 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl—Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 79.

55 For richer engagements with this issue see: Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985); Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice*.

might transform our theorizing about democracy, we would be remiss if we did not take note that all the thinkers in this volume do not stand in an affirmative relationship to democracy. Or to put the point modestly, they have doubts about a style of democracy that accommodates the economic exploitation and disposability of black people via what Cedric Robinson calls “racial capitalism” (see chapters 10, 18, 26, 27, and 30 on W. E. B. Du Bois [by Taylor], Richard Wright [by Shelby], Stokely Carmichael [by Terry], Huey P. Newton [by Cedric Johnson], and Cornel West [by Wood]). For if racism and capitalism are intertwined, with the latter depending on and reproducing difference in a hierarchy of value implied by the former, then the future of a racial egalitarian democracy in America is bleak. It may very well be, as John Drabinski suggests in his wonderful reading of Baldwin (chapter 21), that the constant invocation of democracy often conceals how easily it has served as a tool to deny black people the franchise, to disregard their appeals to the polity, and to perpetuate practices of social and economic domination. Of course Baldwin’s thinking was always a mixture, as Drabinski notes, of hope and despair. The reader will need to decide based on the total arc of this volume just how democracy as a social practice is understood and whether its connection to the harm and violence against black people is internal to its functioning, external to democracy and thus foreign, or external to it but nonetheless capable of being made consistent with democratic practices.

### The Socratic Question: A Conclusion

In the end, we believe this volume returns us to a classical set of concerns captured most powerfully by Socrates as presented in Plato’s *Apology*.<sup>56</sup> By invoking Socrates in this final moment, we do not mean to treat the voices of African American thinkers as a mere echo of Socrates’s, nor do we see the invocation of Socrates as an attempt to legitimize African American political thought. Rather, Socrates serves as a tool to unite the recognized and acknowledged past of traditional “Western” political philosophy with one of the unrecognized and unacknowledged traditions of political theorizing—namely, African American political thought. Using the language of “unrecognized and unacknowledged” hails an audience broader than those who are likely to have written about, studied, or taught the African American tradition. The idea of uniting traditions is not meant to obscure the places of deep tensions we have thus far observed. In deploying Socrates, we have in mind his concerns with the relationship between the form of truth telling and democracy,<sup>57</sup> and his critical posture toward his fellow Athenians born out of a deep affection for the polity to which he belongs.<sup>58</sup> The *Apology* sets

<sup>56</sup> Plato, *Apology*, in *Four Texts on Socrates*, rev. ed., trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>57</sup> Plato, *Apology* 17a–18a.

<sup>58</sup> Plato, *Apology* 28c–30a.

up a relationship between Socrates-as-critic and his fellow Athenians that can be mapped to the relationship between African Americans-as-critics and their fellow Americans.

Standing before a democratic Athens and preparing to be judged, Socrates raises a central question: What is the place of truth telling in the context of a democratic society? Socrates insists that the difference between himself and his accusers—the ones who have brought the charges of impiety and corruption of the youth against him—is that his speech will come unadorned, while theirs will be “beautifully spoken speeches . . . adorned with phrases and words.”<sup>59</sup> But he is keen to instruct his audience that from his accusers they will hear little or nothing true, while from him they will only hear the truth. The contrast between his unadorned truth and the beautifully spoken statements from his accusers is another way of asking the following question: Will ugly truths about who we are be accepted, or must the claims flatter the listener as beautiful words are likely to do before they receive a hearing?

African American political thought wrestles with this question. It does so precisely because African Americans stand in a society that from the very beginning professed a deep commitment to freedom and the equal standing of persons, but nonetheless seemed (and seems) unwilling to deal honestly with the tradition of white supremacy that often worked easily alongside democratic norms. From Walker to Wells to Baldwin to Davis to West, there is an explicit insistence on the need for the polity to deal honestly with its past and the shadow that past casts over the present in order to address the inequalities black people continue to suffer. They often insist on this not merely because they believe it is central to addressing racial domination but also because they believe it is necessary to puncture the innocence of those who exempt themselves from responsibility for racial redress by protesting, “My family never owned slaves!” or who soothe themselves into moral slumber through blind faith in the progressive character of the American polity. The language of innocence and the necessity of progress are to America what the adorned and beautiful speeches were to Athenians. Both aim to flatter and in so doing not only obstruct the growth and development of the polity but deform it and its inhabitants. Writing in a Socratic register, James Baldwin tells us, “People who shut their eyes to reality and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.”<sup>60</sup> Baldwin’s writings are eminently quotable, to be sure, but

59 Plato, *Apology* 17c.

60 James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village” (1953), in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1985), 89. For a reading of Baldwin as a Socratic figure, see Joel Alden Schlosser, “Socrates in a Different Key: James Baldwin and Race in America,” in *Political Companion to James Baldwin*, 219–46. For crucial reflections on Baldwin as a theorist of acknowledgment and disavowal, see George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), chap. 4, and

no less significant for capturing a thought that came before and extended well after him.

For some in the tradition, thinkers such as Delany, early Malcolm X, Wright, and Newton, there is little doubt about American democracy's inability to accept the ugliness of the truths black folks offer. For others in the tradition, the jury is still out. Notwithstanding, African American political thought, much like the wider tradition of Africana philosophy, has more consistently grappled with the Socratic question than the wider tradition of Western political philosophy with its denials and disavowals of the centrality of slavery, colonialism, gendered violence, and empire to the emergence and development of modern liberal democracy. Black people in the West have more consistently laid implicit and explicit claim to the "founding" orientation of a tradition of philosophizing from which they were excluded. And although historians of political philosophy are now helping us to get a better sense of just how central slavery, colonialism, and empire were to the theoretical and practical development of modernity,<sup>61</sup> it should not be surprising they are traveling a road of truth telling at the end of which they shall likely find many in this tradition waiting.

In some ways, the different posture among African Americans toward the Socratic question is tied to the other insight—namely, critique born of civic affection. Socrates famously rejects the proposal of securing his freedom by abandoning his philosophical enterprise—an enterprise that involved a deep critical evaluation of his society and the members who inhabit it. In fact, he tells his audience that he will continue his practice of questioning and that he will do this to "whomever, younger or older. . . both foreigner and townsman, but more so to the townsman, inasmuch as you are closer to me in kin."<sup>62</sup> While the language of kinship in Athenian society has a complex legal connection to which Socrates is here alluding, what should not be missed are the social and political norms of Athenian society that shaped Socrates—an inheritance that he willingly embraced. Kinship in this sense is about a kind of self-understanding that binds members of the polity together and generates civic attachment.

Here too, African Americans have often stood in an ambivalent relationship to their civic attachment to the American polity. In the writings of African Americans we often hear that they have performed more thoroughly than their white counterparts the animating commitments of American citizenship, that they have been more true to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, and that they have provided a deeper form of education to American citizenship than might be found among their counterparts. This civic attachment and its unrealized goods

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George Shulman, "Acknowledgment and Disavowal as an Idiom for Theorizing Politics," *Theory & Event* 14, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>61</sup> For a wonderful review of this literature see Jennifer Pitts, "Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 211–35.

<sup>62</sup> Plato, *Apology* 30a.

have often sent some of them away seeking to realize freedom dreams elsewhere, and they have led some of them back as they insist that the United States become more than what it seems to be in its treatment of black people. But whether in the United States or elsewhere, they have often understood their ethical and political commitments to have been forged through the limitations and, perhaps, unrealized possibilities of American democracy. In this, they too have laid claim to an inheritance and often transformed its meaning, even when they have sought to escape its sometimes vicious and cruel logic.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> We are grateful to Lawrie Balfour, Robert Gooding-Williams, and Alvin B. Tillery Jr. for detailed feedback on this introduction.



# 1: Phillis Wheatley and the Rhetoric of Politics and Race

Vincent Carretta

*How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the Exercise of oppressive Power over others agree,—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine”*

Phillis Wheatley to Samson Occom, February 11, 1774<sup>1</sup>

*Phyllis Wheatley, the black poetess, was easily the pioneer.*

W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>2</sup>

In “The Vision of Phillis the Blessed (An Allegory of Negro American Literature in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries),” one of his lesser-known essays, W. E. B. Du Bois was far ahead of his times in recognizing Phillis Wheatley (1753?–84) as the founder of the African American traditions of literature and political thought.<sup>3</sup> In 1941 Du Bois published his “Vision,” or allegory, of Wheatley’s relationship to authors of African descent during the 150 years following her death, before the recovery of some of Wheatley’s most overt comments on race and politics, and before the consequent reassessment and reevaluation of Wheatley’s place in the evolution of African American literature and political thought. Du Bois’s “Vision” was nonetheless a turning point in the transition from seeing Wheatley’s primacy as mainly chronological to appreciating her as an ideological pioneer as well. Du Bois imagines that “looking out from her own singular and narrow corner of the world, Phillis must have had visions of the souls and voices, who, coming after her, continued and fulfilled her promise and tradition—David Walker and his bitter cry,” for example—those “who for one hundred fifty years, in stress and striving, continued the vision of Phillis the Blessed. They not only

1 All quotations from Phillis Wheatley’s writings are taken from *The Writings of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

2 “The Negro in Literature and Art,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1913), in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 863.

3 W. E. B. Du Bois, “Phillis Wheatley and African American Culture,” in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 328–42, originally published as “The Vision of Phillis the Blessed (An Allegory of Negro American Literature in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries),” *Fisk News* 14 (May 1941).



mirrored her soul but illumined the ages. What they became in later years, she in a very real sense, fore-shadowed and fore-knew.”<sup>4</sup>

Wheatley left no political manifesto, and she is usually denied a place in the African American pamphlet tradition because she wrote primarily in poetry rather than prose.<sup>5</sup> But she anticipated the rhetorical strategies and tactics found in the “voices, who, coming after her, continued and fulfilled her promise and tradition.” Since, like Du Bois after her, Wheatley believed that in visions begin realities, poetry was the perfect means to convey her message of freedom, equality, and inclusion. Imagination, the “imperial queen,” grants her the power to “with new worlds amaze th’unbounded soul,” to foreshadow and foreknow a world realized only long after her death.<sup>6</sup> Surprisingly, neither Du Bois nor commentators on his writings have appreciated the extent to which Wheatley anticipates the rhetorical means and ends that Melvin L. Rogers identifies in Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. Wheatley employs what one critic of Du Bois calls “expressive self-realization” to write herself and, by extension, other people of African descent into a reimagined American body politic.<sup>7</sup> And she conceived her role to be that body’s moral monitor, its political and social conscience, identifying for her readers not only what that body is but, far more importantly, what it could and should be. As Rogers says of Du Bois, Wheatley’s conception of the American identity comprises “‘descriptive’ and ‘aspirational’ dimensions” in “the battle . . . about the meaning of who constituted the ‘we’ of the nation.”<sup>8</sup>

The person now best known as Phillis Wheatley was born around 1753 in West Africa, most likely south of the Senegambia area.<sup>9</sup> In 1761 the slave ship *Phillis* brought her to Boston, where the prosperous merchant John Wheatley and his wife, Susanna, purchased her. As Du Bois notes, she was “blessed. . . with security and affection, with education beyond her status, by contact with cultured folk.”<sup>10</sup> Wheatley’s mistress enabled her to become literate and encouraged her to write poetry that soon found its way into New England newspapers. Phillis Wheatley gained transatlantic recognition with her 1770 elegy on the death of the evangelist George Whitefield, which she addressed and sent to his English patron, the countess of Huntingdon.

By 1772 Wheatley had written enough poems to allow her to attempt to capi-

4 Du Bois, “Vision,” 330, 332.

5 Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky, eds., *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790–1860* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 27n4.

6 Phillis Wheatley, “On Imagination,” lines 1, 22.

7 Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009) 4.

8 Melvin L. Rogers, “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (2012): 188, 192.

9 The fullest account of Phillis Wheatley’s life and times is Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* (2011; rev. ed. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

10 Du Bois, “Vision,” 329.

talize on her growing transatlantic reputation by producing a book of previously published and new poems. Rather than publishing her volume in Boston, Phillis and her mistress successfully sought a London publisher through Huntingdon's patronage. In 1773 Phillis accompanied her owner's son to London, where she spent several weeks promoting the forthcoming publication of her *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral*. Its publication made her the first English-speaking person of African descent to publish a book, and consequently a founder of African American literature. Phillis Wheatley was on her way back to Boston before her book appeared in September. She had probably agreed to return only if her owners promised to free her, as she told a correspondent, "at the desire of [her] friends in England," one of whom was Granville Sharp.<sup>11</sup> Sharp had procured a ruling in the King's Bench in 1772 that no slave brought to England could legally be forced to return to the colonies as a slave. Wheatley's owners freed her within a few weeks of her return in September 1773 to Boston, where she quickly took charge of promoting, distributing, and selling her book. Publication of Wheatley's *Poems* gained her widespread contemporaneous fame, bringing her to the attention of Voltaire, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin, John Paul Jones, and George Washington, among others.

After Phillis's former mistress died in March 1774, Phillis continued to live with her former master, John Wheatley, until his death in March 1778. She became engaged to John Peters, a free black, the next month, and married him in November 1778. Initially a successful businessman, Peters soon suffered financial distress during the post-Revolution depression. Meanwhile Wheatley's fame was short lived once she was on her own and after her marriage. Phillis Wheatley Peters, who published only a few poems after 1773, unsuccessfully tried to find a Boston publisher for a proposed second volume of her writings, which was to include correspondence and was to be dedicated to Benjamin Franklin. John Peters was probably in jail for debt when Phillis died in poverty in Boston on December 5, 1784. Her first biographer, Matilda Margaretta Odell, claims that Phillis and John had three children, who all died young.<sup>12</sup> However, no records of their births, baptisms, or deaths have been found. Although Odell incorrectly says that John Peters "went South," he died just north of Boston in March 1801.

Wheatley's *Poems* was quickly, widely, and generally favorably, although usually somewhat patronizingly, reviewed in nine British periodicals in 1773. Many of the contemporaneous reviews included exemplary poems from the collection. Two of the earliest reviewers noted the political implications of the publication of Wheatley's *Poems*. Richard Gough laments in *Gentleman's Magazine* that "youth, innocence, and piety, united with genius, have not yet been able to restore her to the condition and character with which she was invested by the Great Author of

<sup>11</sup> Phillis Wheatley to David Wooster, October 18, 1773.

<sup>12</sup> Margaretta Matilda Odell, "Memoir," in Phillis Wheatley and Margaretta Matilda Odell, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave* (Boston: Geo. W. Light, 1834).

her being. So powerful is custom in rendering the heart insensible to the rights of nature, and the claims of excellence.”<sup>13</sup> The anonymous commentator in *Monthly Review* is “much concerned to find that this ingenious young woman is yet a slave. The people of Boston boast themselves chiefly on their principles of liberty. One such act as the purchase of her freedom, would, in our opinion, have done them more honour than hanging a thousand trees with ribbons and emblems.”<sup>14</sup>

From shortly after Wheatley’s death, abolitionists opposed to the transatlantic slave trade, as well as emancipationists opposed to the institution of slavery, frequently cited the literary quality of Wheatley’s poetry to demonstrate the humanity and inherent equality of Africans. In response, defenders of slavery denied those achievements. Thomas Jefferson makes the most notorious, and dismayingly influential, remarks on her poetry: “Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrus [inspiration] of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phillis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions composed under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the *Dunciad* are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem.”<sup>15</sup>

During the nineteenth century and through the first three quarters of the twentieth century, critics on both sides of the debate over the intellectual capacity and literary achievements of people of African descent tended to emphasize the fact that Wheatley wrote rather than to look closely at what she wrote. White critics before the late twentieth century often failed to take her seriously enough to analyze her writings carefully, perhaps because they saw her as an African American author rather than as an author who was African American. In other words, to them she was too black to be taken seriously. Prior to the last quarter of the twentieth century, Wheatley’s comments on race and politics were usually underappreciated. Even as sympathetic a commentator as Du Bois, who recognized that Wheatley was aware of the “incongruities and contradictions” of her world, believed that “she was painfully aware that her color set her singularly apart, but she seldom mentioned it. She was aware of slavery but said little about it.”<sup>16</sup>

Some black critics during the 1960s and 1970s denounced Wheatley and her

13 *Gentleman’s Magazine* 43 (September 1773): 456.

14 *Monthly Review* 49 (December 1773): 457–59. The nine reviews are reproduced in Mukhtar Ali Isani, “The British Reception of Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects,” *Journal of Negro History* 66, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 144–49.

15 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London, 1787), ed. Frank Shuffelton (New York: Penguin, 1999), q. 14, 147. Rather than intentionally misspelling Wheatley’s name, Jefferson was probably correctly spelling it phonetically from memory: during the eighteenth century the words *eat* and *ate* were both pronounced as we now pronounce *ate*, and when Jefferson was writing *Notes in France* he most likely did not have with him his copy of Wheatley’s *Poems*, now in the Library of Congress. The “heroes” of Alexander Pope’s satiric mock-epic *Dunciad*, published in London initially in 1728 and expanded in 1743, are the bad writers he mocks. Unlike Hercules, Pope was hunchbacked, very thin, and less than five feet tall.

16 Du Bois, “Vision,” 332.

writings as being insufficiently black to be taken seriously.<sup>17</sup> To them she was a traitor to her race because she allegedly failed to address the issues of race and slavery. Wheatley's denigrators showed little familiarity with her actual writings. There were of course exceptions to the way Wheatley was treated before 1980.<sup>18</sup> Manuscripts of unpublished poems and letters by her, as well as early manuscript versions of several of her subsequently published poems, were discovered during the 1970s and 1980s.

The 1980s mark the turning point in the biographical, historical, and literary appreciation of Wheatley and her writings.<sup>19</sup> The first scholarly and critical editions of her writings appeared. Critics in the 1990s applied the biographical and historical discoveries of the previous decade to recognize Wheatley as a perceptive and subtle commentator on race, gender, and politics. Close attention to who Wheatley was, as well as to what and how she wrote, continued in the twenty-first century as literary critics and historians relocated her from the margins of the eighteenth-century world to its center.<sup>20</sup> Few, if any, commentators today would agree with Du Bois's assessment of Wheatley's contemporaneous significance: "She made a strange and lonesome figure in the America of the day just before the Revolution—calm and correct without, silent. Her deep sense of religion and evangelical patois veiled her more human soul to us as it did to Thomas Jefferson."<sup>21</sup>

Phillis Wheatley spent most of her short life as a subject of the British monarch, a fact that gave her a choice of political identities unavailable to others. We have come as far as possible from thinking of Wheatley as relatively apolitical and silent on the issue of race. But we should be careful not to go too far in identify-

17 E.g., Terence Collins, "Phillis Wheatley: The Dark Side of Poetry," *Phylon* 3, no. 1 (1975): 78–88; Smith, Eleanor, "Phillis Wheatley: A Black Perspective," *Journal of Negro Education* 43 (1974): 401–7.

18 Arthur P. Davis, "Personal Elements in the Poetry of Phillis Wheatley," *Phylon* 14 (1953): 191–98; Mukhtar Ali Isani, "The Original Version of Wheatley's 'On the Death of Dr. Samuel Marshall,'" *Studies in Black Literature* 7, no. 3 (1976): 20.

19 E.g., David Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism and Phillis Wheatley's 'Sable Veil,' 'Length'ned Chain,' and 'Knitted Heart,'" in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 338–444; William H. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley: A Bio-bibliography* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), and *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* (New York: Garland, 1984); John C. Shields, "Phillis Wheatley's Struggle for Freedom in Her Poetry and Prose," in *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 229–70; Phillis Wheatley, *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Julian D. Mason Jr. 1966, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Phillis Wheatley, *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Phillis Wheatley, *Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 2001).

20 E.g., Eric Slauter, "Neoclassical Culture in a Society with Slaves: Race and Rights in the Age of Wheatley," *Early American Studies*, 2004, 81–122; David Waldstreicher, "The Wheatleyan Moment," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 9, no. 3 (2011): 522–51; Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley*.

21 Du Bois, "Vision," 329.

ing her as consistently supporting the separation of Britain and its North American colonies. Her oeuvre should be considered diachronically—recognizing the significance of when she wrote what and to whom—rather than synchronically, as if her positions were unchanging. Although Wheatley often commented on political matters, most of her surviving writings date from the period of her life when she was a slave. And most of those writings are poems. Hence anyone attempting to identify her political beliefs in any particular writing must consider how free she was to express them, as well as whether the voice we hear is that of the author or that of a persona she has created. Wheatley's frequent comments on politics enable us to identify her as a consistent "patriot royalist" who aspired to be recognized as the poet laureate of an America initially ruled by George III and subsequently governed by George Washington. Even after Wheatley gained her freedom, as a woman of African descent she still had to find ways to make her readers imagine her as a member of the body politic. We lack evidence that Wheatley read any contemporaneous works of political theory, such as Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke's "Idea of a Patriot King" or William Blackstone's *Commentaries*, but her writings demonstrate that she was well versed in the pervasive political discourse of her times.

Phillis Wheatley was already commenting on transatlantic economic and political subjects by the time she was around fifteen years old. Her ability to produce poetry proved her intellect and humanity to her readers, a fact that Jefferson acknowledged by denying it. The act of writing was a political act. Wheatley's poetic career demonstrates her apparent agreement with the observation made by Samuel Johnson's character Imlac in *Rasselas*: the poet "must write as the interpreter of [human] nature, and legislator of mankind, and consider [her]self as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as a being superior to time and place."<sup>22</sup> The conviction that poets have the authority, and even obligation, to speak truth to power can be traced through the words and practices of many of Wheatley's predecessors, including Johnson, Alexander Pope, John Dryden, and Sir Philip Sidney, as well as the classical Roman poets Horace and Virgil. The teenaged Wheatley was in effect laying claim to being a proto-national American laureate by inserting herself into the political discourse. And by doing so explicitly as an "Ethiopian," she compelled her readers to at least imagine women and people of African descent as participants in the conversation. From her earliest political poems Wheatley uses ethos, pathos, and logos in rhetorical appeals to claim a previously inconceivable equal place for people of African descent in what would become the United States. And in doing so, Wheatley "had visions of the souls and voices, who, coming after her, continued and fulfilled her promise and tradition—David Walker and his bitter cry," as well as Du Bois himself.<sup>23</sup>

22 Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*, in *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. Gwin J. Kolb, vol. 16 of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 45.

23 Du Bois, "Vision," 330.

Some of Wheatley's earliest poems demonstrate her interest in being recognized as the poetic voice of America responding to the growing tensions between Britain and its North American colonies during the 1760s.<sup>24</sup> Many colonists saw the Revenue Act (the "Sugar Act") of 1764 and subsequent legislation as unprecedented attempts to exert Parliament's authority over the thirteen colonies, which did not have representatives in Parliament but had their own legislatures. Colonists saw the new acts intended to raise revenue as different in kind from previous acts of Parliament aimed at regulating colonial commerce. The most significant of these acts was the Stamp Act, passed by Parliament and ordered by King George III in March 1765 to go into effect in November 1765. To the shock of Parliament and the king, colonists resisted the new act so vigorously that some newspapers suspended publication, agents hired to collect the duties resigned, and government officials in Boston were hanged in effigy. A Stamp Act Congress convened in New York City in October 1765 to formally protest imposition of the duties, marking the first joint colonial response to the British government and a major step in the development of a national identity, announced in the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Colonists boycotted imported British goods to avoid paying the taxes. Colonial resistance was so strong that a new ministry proposed, and the king agreed, to repeal the Stamp Act in March 1766. Even as it repealed the Stamp Act, however, Parliament declared its authority to impose such revenue-raising taxes on the colonies.

We should resist the urge to read every comment Wheatley makes about contemporaneous politics as proof of a consistently radical separatist position akin

24 Wheatley's relationship to revolutionary events has been frequently noted, for example: Sidney Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, 1777-1800* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973); Charles W. Akers, "'Our Modern Egyptians': Phillis Wheatley and the Whig Campaign against Slavery in Revolutionary Boston," *Journal of Negro History* 60, no. 3 (1975): 397-410; Phillip M. Richards, "Phillis Wheatley and Literary Americanization," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1992): 163-91; Betsy Erkkila, "Phillis Wheatley and the Black American Revolution," in *A Mixed Race: Ethnicity in Early America*, ed. Frank Shuffleton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 225-40; Helen Burke, "Problematising American Dissent: The Subject of Phillis Wheatley," in *Cohesion and Dissent in America*, ed. Carol Colatrella and Joseph Alkana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 193-209; T. H. Breen, "Making History: The Force of Public Opinion and the Last Years of Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute (Williamsburg, VA: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture / Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 67-95; Bruce D. Dickson Jr., *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680-1865* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 39-91; Peter Coviello, "Agonizing Affection: Affect and Nation in Early America," *Early American Literature* 37, no. 3 (2002): 439-68; Daniel J. Ennis, "Poetry and American Revolutionary Identity: The Case of Phillis Wheatley and John Paul Jones," *Studies in Eighteenth-century Culture* 31 (2002): 85-98; Eric Slauter, "Neoclassical Culture in a Society with Slaves: Race and Rights in the Age of Wheatley," *Early American Studies* 2 (2004): 81-122; John C. Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation: Backgrounds and Contexts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008); Eric Slauter, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 169-214.

to that of Thomas Jefferson. She probably rhetorically positioned herself as a royalist member of the loyal opposition to George III's ministers, rather than to the king himself or to the idea of kingship. For a remarkable length of time—until about 1775—Americans generally prided themselves on being good subjects of their king, “patriotic royalists.” The question Stephen Hopkins asked in 1764 was intended to be rhetorical: “Are not the people in the colonies as loyal and dutiful subjects as any age or nation ever produced,—and are they not as useful to the kingdom, in this remote quarter of the world, as their fellow subjects are who dwell in *Britain*?”<sup>25</sup> As it became clearer to everyone that measures unpopular in America had support in Parliament as well as in the ministry, despite evidence to the contrary, many colonists expressed the belief that George III was their potential, if not their actual, ally against what they saw as threats to the British constitution and its guarantees of freedom. The growing tension between Britain and its colonies occasioned several poetic responses from Wheatley, only one of which was ever published during her lifetime. In each case she espoused a position that has been called “patriot Royalism,” the professed conviction that Parliament had usurped the authority of the king in Britain's relationship with its colonies.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, Wheatley writes within a tradition of eighteenth-century British political theory that traces back to Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke's “The Idea of a Patriot King” (written 1738, published 1749).<sup>27</sup> As late as July 1, 1776, John Dickinson, a founding father who supported armed resistance, still argued for reconciliation with Britain.

One of Wheatley's surviving poems on the Stamp Act crisis and Britain's other efforts to tax the colonies is more subversively monitory than her published work. “America” is no doubt a draft version of “On America, 1768,” listed in her 1772 “Proposals” but never published. “America” is a brief allegorical history of New England from its founding to the crisis of relations between “a certain lady” [i.e., Britannia] and her “only son” [i.e., America]:

A certain lady had an only son  
 He grew up daily virtuous as he grew  
 Fearing his Strength which she undoubted knew  
 She laid some taxes on her darling son (lines 8–11)

25 Stephen Hopkins, *The Rights of Colonies Examined. Published by Authority* (Providence, RI: William Goddard, 1764), 21.

26 Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 5.

27 Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Spirit of Patriotism: On the Idea of a Patriot King; and On the State of Parties, at the Accession of King George the First* (London, 1749; repr. 1752, 1767, 1775, 1783). On the influence of Bolingbroke's “Idea” during the eighteenth century, see William D. Liddle, “‘A Patriot King, or None’: Lord Bolingbroke and the American Renunciation of George III,” *Journal of American History* 65 (1979): 951–70; David Armitage, “A Patriot for Whom? The Afterlives of Bolingbroke's Patriot King,” *Journal of British Studies* 36 (1997): 397–418.

The poem calls for reconciliation between the mother and son before the child grows strong enough to be able to overpower the parent. The invocation of “Liberty” in a work by an enslaved person of African descent, who identifies herself as such—“Thy Power, O Liberty, makes strong the weak / And (wond’rous instinct) Ethiopians speak” (lines 5–6)—as well as her mention of “Scourges” (15) and “rebel” (23), and her comment that “[America] weeps afresh to feel this Iron chain” (31), introduces the subtext of slavery to the poem. Under the pseudonym “Humphry Ploughjogger” in the *Boston Gazette* on October 14, 1765, John Adams employs the image of slavery to protest British economic policies: “We won’t be their negroes. Providence never designed us for negroes, I know, for if it had it would have given us black hides, and thick lips, and flat noses, and short wooly hair, which it han’t done, and therefore never intended us for slaves.” Wheatley implies that black Americans have even more reason to call for “Liberty” and protest against restraints than their white owners, who suffer only metaphorical “Scourges” and chains. Wheatley subtly anticipates in her unpublished poem the question Samuel Johnson would later sarcastically ask in *Taxation No Tyranny* (London, 1775): “How is it we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?”<sup>28</sup> Wheatley’s equation of the quest for “Liberty” by both black and white Americans exemplifies her aspiration that “sometimes by Simile, a victory’s won” (l. 7).

Wheatley assumes an extraordinary rhetorical position in the poem in relation to her readers. Like authors before her, most notably Alexander Pope, she transforms a political disability into a rhetorical virtue. Wheatley’s admired Pope uses his status as a politically disenfranchised Roman Catholic and his appearance—he was mocked as a hunchbacked dwarf—to place himself rhetorically at the margin of his society. Doing so enables him to speak as a disinterested observer and critic of a society he was in but not of. Wheatley, too, presents herself as a stranger in a strange land. Her referring to herself as an “Ethiopian” does much more than simply reveal her complexion, ethnicity, and probable status to her readers. **By calling herself an Ethiopian rather than an African or a black, she claims an identity that grants her biblical authority to speak to her readers.** Wheatley surely expected her readers to recall that Moses had married an Ethiopian (Numbers 12:1), and that Psalm 68:31 prophesies that “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” As Du Bois envisions, subsequent African American “souls and voices” would imitate Wheatley’s strategy and tactics.

Wheatley also commemorates the Stamp Act crisis in “To the King’s Most Excellent Majesty on His Repealing the American Stamp Act 1768,” a draft of her “On the King” listed in the 1772 “Proposals,” and ultimately published in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* as “To the King’s Most Excellent Maj-

28 Samuel Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny* (London, 1775), in *Political Writings*, ed. Donald J. Greene vol. 10 of *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 454.



esty. 1768.” By dating her poem 1768 in its title and including a footnote indicating that its ostensible occasion was the repeal of the Stamp Act two years earlier, Wheatley renders the poem a monition addressed to the king. She implicitly advises him that he again needs to intervene on behalf of the colonies in response to recent actions taken by Parliament, including the Townshend Revenue Act, the seizure of a vessel owned by John Hancock for violations of trade regulations, and the British military occupation of Boston.

Even more than Wheatley’s draft, her published version celebrates the king as a parental figure who has freed his children from the tyranny of Parliament and the politicians in his ministry. She does so by endorsing the political fiction that Parliament had acted against the king’s wishes. That political fiction reflects the constitutional premise that William Blackstone identifies in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*:

Besides the attribute of sovereignty, the law also ascribes to the king, in his political capacity, absolute *perfection*. The king can do no wrong. Which antient and fundamental maxim is not to be understood, as if every thing transacted by the government was of course just and lawful, but means only two things. First, that whatever is exceptionable in the conduct of public affairs is not to be imputed to the king, nor is he answerable for it personally to his people: for this doctrine would totally destroy that constitutional independence of the crown, which is necessary for the balance of power, in our free and active, and therefore compounded, constitution. And, secondly, it means that the prerogative of the crown extends not to do any injury: it is created for the benefit of the people, and therefore cannot be exerted to their prejudice.

The king, moreover, is not only incapable of *doing* wrong, but even of *thinking* wrong: he can never mean to do an improper thing: in him is no folly or weakness. [emphases in original]<sup>29</sup>

Wheatley’s reference to a familial relationship between Britain and America underscores the alleged unnaturalness of the treatment America received and the natural link between the colonies and their mother country. Coming from an enslaved person of African descent, the last line of her poem—“A monarch’s smile can set his subjects free!”—is also a not-so-subtle reminder that not only taxed colonists should be set free:

But how shall we the *British* king reward!  
Rule thou in peace, our father, and our lord!  
Midst the remembrance of thy favours past,  
The meanest peasants most admire the last.\*

29 William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1765–69; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 4 vols., 1:329.

May *George*, belov'd by all the nations round,  
 Live with heav'n's choicest constant blessings crown'd!  
 Great God, direct, and guard him from on high,  
 And from his head let ev'ry evil fly!  
 And may each clime with equal gladness see  
 A monarch's smile can set his subjects free! (lines 6–15; emphases in original)

\* *The Repeal of the Stamp Act. [Wheatley's note]*

Wheatley's argument and choice of imagery indicate that she was very familiar with contemporaneous political rhetoric. The same sort of rhetorical appeal occurs in the Stamp Act satire *The Times: A Poem. By an American*, attributed to Benjamin Church and published in Boston in 1765:

GEORGE! Parent! King! Our Guardian, Glory, Pride,  
 And thou fair REGENT! Blooming by his side!  
 Thy offspring pleads a parent's fostering care,  
 Reject not, frown not, but in mercy spare. (8)

The continuing unrest in Boston led the British government in 1768 to send Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson the four thousand troops he requested to try to keep the peace. Their presence had the opposite effect, however, because there were so many that the citizens of Boston were forced to house British soldiers in their homes. The occupation appeared to confirm fears of a design to impose tyrannical rule on the colonies. The formation of the self-described "Sons of Liberty" and subsequent acts of resistance in turn appeared to confirm British fears of a colonial rebellion. Harassment of the occupying forces soon led to the death of "the first martyr for the [colonial] cause" (line 2), eleven-year-old Christopher Snider. He was only about two years younger than Wheatley when she commemorated him as the "first martyr" in her never-published "On the Death of Mr. Snider Murder'd by Richardson." Although Wheatley uses her poetic license to elevate young Snider to the status of a potential "Achilles" cut down "in his mid career" (6), he may have simply been at the wrong place at the wrong time. Saying that he would rather be governed by one tyrant rather than many, Boston merchant Theophilus Lillie had refused to participate in the boycott of British goods. In response, some self-styled patriots erected an effigy of him in front of his store to warn others to avoid doing business with him. When Ebenezer Richardson, a loyalist like Lillie, tried to remove the effigy on February 22, 1770, he was confronted by a rock-throwing crowd composed mainly of boys, who chased him back to his own house. Richardson fired into the crowd from his window to keep them from breaking into his house. Portrayed by Wheatley as satanic, Richardson, "the grand Usurpers bravely vaunted Heir" (22), killed Snider and wounded several others. Only the intervention of British soldiers, who had heard the shots,

saved Richardson from the crowd when they arrested him. Richardson was tried and convicted for the murder of Snider but served only two years in jail before being pardoned by Governor Hutchinson. Speeches denouncing tyranny and calling for Richardson's execution accompanied the massive burial parade for the boy Wheatley calls "their young champion" (10) and "this young martial genius" (15). Wheatley considers Snider a political martyr whose death was "in heaven's eternal court . . . decreed" (1) as part of God's providential design. Snider's death would probably be far better known today had it not been overshadowed by the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770, when British soldiers killed five civilians, including Crispus Attucks, "the first martyr for the cause" of African descent. The Boston Massacre was the subject of Wheatley's now-lost "On the Affray in King-Street, on the Evening of the 5th of March" advertised in her 1772 "Proposals."

Wheatley's aspirational reimagination of who constitutes "the 'we' of the nation" is found in the work that in 1770 first brought her transatlantic fame: *An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of . . . the late Reverend, and Pious George Whitefield*, addressed to Whitefield's patron, the countess of Huntingdon. Wheatley's elegy was initially published in Boston as a broadside. She subsequently revised and retitled it "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. GEORGE WHITEFIELD. 1770" in her *Poems*. Wheatley ventriloquizes Whitefield's voice to distinguish between "AMERICANS" and "Africans" (*An Elegiac Poem*, 39, 41). Both the headnote to *An Elegiac Poem* in 1770 and the frontispiece to her *Poems* in 1773 identify Wheatley as a young woman of African descent. Readers were unlikely to overlook that identification when Wheatley significantly and pointedly speaks in the poem to the countess as the voice of "we Americans" ("On the Death," 38; *An Elegiac Poem*, 45, emphases in original).

Prior to the British occupation of Boston, Phillis Wheatley quite carefully balanced her public expressions of revolutionary and loyalist sentiments. Her "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c." is one of the most carefully crafted poems in the 1773 volume. Wheatley reappropriates the concept of slavery from its common metaphorical use in the colonial discourse of discontent, which described any perceived limitation on colonial rights and liberty as an attempt by England to "enslave" (white) Americans.<sup>30</sup> Wheatley appears to use *slavery* in this conventional sense in the poem:

No more, *America*, in mournful strain  
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,  
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain,  
Which wanton *Tyranny* with lawless hand  
Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the land. (lines 15–19; emphases in original)

30 On the pervasive use of metaphorical slavery in colonial discourse, see Peter A. Dorsey, *Common Bondage: Slavery as Metaphor in Revolutionary America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010).

Wheatley invokes her authority (her ethos) to speak from experience and appeals to her readers' pathos to remind her readers of the reality of chattel slavery trivialized by the political metaphor:

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
 Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,  
 Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
 By feeling hearts alone best understood,  
 I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
 Was snatch'd from *Afric's* fancy'd happy seat[.]  
 .....  
 Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
 Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (20–25, 30–31, emphases in original)

Wheatley revised the poem from manuscript to publication to move directly from metaphorical to actual slavery.<sup>31</sup> Revolutionary rhetoric made many colonists question for the first time the hypocrisy of owners of chattel slaves protesting metaphorical slavery. A repeated theme in Wheatley's writings is the similitude of the political agency denied to white colonists and that which they in turn denied to their black compatriots.

In the summer of 1773 Wheatley was given the opportunity to escape from American slavery. Her owner's son took her to England, where her book of collected poems was soon to be published. Phillis Wheatley arrived in London on the eve of the first anniversary of what many Britons, especially those of African descent, considered the emancipation proclamation for English slaves. Lord Mansfield, Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench, the highest common law court in England, had ruled on June 22, 1772, that James Somerset, a slave brought to England in 1769 from Massachusetts by his master, a Boston customs official, could not legally be forced by his master back to the colonies. Although rather than outlawing slavery, Mansfield's ruling technically established only that a slave could not be seized by his master and forced against his will to leave England, and that a slave could get a writ of habeas corpus to prevent his master's action, the ruling certainly undermined slavery in England by denying slave masters the coercive legal power to force slaves back to the colonies. Phillis Wheatley probably agreed to return to Boston only on the condition that she would be freed if she did so. And she was. She had the power to insist that she would return to Boston only if she would be freed once there. In this negotiation, Wheatley had the stronger hand. Wheatley could neither legally nor practically be forced back to the colonies. In effect, the choice of freedom, the terms, and the place were Phillis Wheatley's to make.

31 Thirteen lines separate the metaphorical "enslave" and the account of the speaker's physical enslavement in the manuscript version of the poem.

Her choice to return to America with a promise of freedom was risky but not unreasonable. From her perspective, the eradication of slavery in both Britain and its American colonies may have seemed ideologically inevitable. Blackstone contended in the 1760s that

if neither captivity, nor the sale of oneself, can by the law of nature and reason, reduce the parent to slavery, much less can it reduce the offspring.

... And now it is laid down, that a slave or negro, the instant he lands in England, becomes a freeman; that is, the law will protect him in the enjoyment of his person, his liberty, and his property.<sup>32</sup>

Some colonists anticipated the application of the Mansfield judgment to America. For example, on January 8, 1774, the Loyalist Richard Wells wrote anonymously in *The Pennsylvania Packet*, "I contend, that by the laws of the English constitution, and by our *own declarations*, the instant a Negro sets his foot in America, he is as free as if he had landed in England."<sup>33</sup> The question of whether the Mansfield decision applied to the American colonies arose because it was rendered in the court of common law, based on the unwritten English constitution and historical precedent, rather than a ruling on positive law that had been passed by both Houses of Parliament and signed by the monarch. Unlike the colonies, England had no positive laws regarding the institution of slavery on its soil, though of course the English constitution allowed for the making of such positive laws and applying them at home and in the colonies. Blackstone explained that in the absence of any positive metropolitan law regarding slavery, the distinction between "two species of colonies" authorized each colony to write positive law on the subject:

But there is a difference between these two species of colonies, with respect to the laws by which they are bound. For it is held, that if an uninhabited country be discovered and planted by English subjects, all the English laws are immediately there in force. For as the law is the birthright of every subject, so wherever they go they carry their laws with them. But in conquered or ceded countries, that have already laws of their own, the king may indeed alter and change those laws; but, till he does actually change them, the antient laws of the country remain, unless such as are against the law of God, as in the case of an infidel country,

Our American plantations are principally of this latter sort, being obtained in the last century either by right of conquest and driving out the natives (with what natural justice I shall not at present enquire) or by treaties. And therefore the common

32 Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 1:412.

33 For an account of North American newspaper reports of the Mansfield ruling, see Patricia Bradley, *Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 66–80.

law of England, as such, has no allowance or authority there; they being no part of the mother country, but distinct (though dependent) dominions.<sup>34</sup>

Some colonists recognized the ideological consistency of opposing both political and chattel slavery. Nathaniel Niles, for example, in the first of his *Two Discourses on Liberty* (Newburyport, Massachusetts, 1774), exhorts his countrymen, "God gave us liberty, and we have enslaved our fellow-men. May we not fear that the law of retaliation is about to be executed on us? . . . Would we enjoy liberty? Then we must grant it to others."<sup>35</sup>

Phillis Wheatley did not naively risk returning to Boston as a slave when she could have freed herself in London. Soon after she was back in America, she wrote to David Wooster that she was shrewd enough to have taken out an extra insurance policy by sending a copy of her manumission papers to Israel Mauduit in London. She is clear about her motives for having done so: "The Instrument is drawn, so as to secure me and my property from the hands of the Exectutrs [executors], administrators, &c. of my master, & secure whatsoever should be given me as my Own. A Copy is sent to Isra. Mauduit Esq. F.R.S. [Fellow of the Royal Society]."<sup>36</sup> Phillis apparently already had property, besides her own person, to protect, and she clearly expected to gain more, all of which she sought to keep out of the hands of John Wheatley's heirs. She appreciated how vulnerable any free person of African descent remained in any societies where slavery was legal.

Phillis Wheatley's decision to return to Boston from London in late 1773 set her on the path to fully embracing an African American identity. She probably considered herself to be a "legislator of mankind," contributing the power of poetry, "the highest learning," to the movement to achieve freedom in America for all people of African descent.<sup>37</sup> Her comments on slavery, especially during the early 1770s, should be read in the context of unsuccessful petitions by her fellow black Bostonians to the Massachusetts governor and legislature. A petition signed by "Felix" and submitted to Governor Thomas Hutchinson in January 1773 appeals for freedom primarily on religious grounds. Four months later, "Felix" and three other blacks signed, not a "humble petition" as in January, but far more assertive "instructions" addressed to the Massachusetts General Court.<sup>38</sup> Dated April 20, 1773, less than three weeks before Wheatley sailed from Boston, this petition directly calls attention to the parallel between the metaphorical slavery the white colonists complained about and the chattel slavery the petitioners suffered, and

34 Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 1:104-5.

35 Niles, *Two Discourses*, 38.

36 Phillis Wheatley to David Wooster, October 18, 1773, in Wheatley, *Writings*, 110.

37 Johnson, *Rasselas*, 45, 38.

38 Thomas J. Davis, "Emancipation Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England: A Note on Four Black Petitions in Massachusetts, 1773-1777," *New England Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (1989): 248-63.

argues for emancipation on the grounds of religion and natural rights. Four days before Wheatley returned to Boston, and a few weeks at most before she gained her freedom, Theodore Parsons and Eliphat Pearson published anonymously *A Forensic Dispute* on the legality of slavery.<sup>39</sup> The antislavery disputant based his argument on religious, sentimental, historical, and natural rights grounds.

Wheatley's own emancipation allowed her to join the conversation about slavery overtly by appropriating revolutionary rhetoric to openly equate contemporaneous slave owners—"Modern Egyptians"—with Old Testament villains, and by implication people of African descent with the Israelites, God's chosen people.<sup>40</sup> She combines an argument based on natural rights—"in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance"—with a prophetic voice to warn slave owners that divine punishment awaits "those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their Fellow Creatures" by disobeying "the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty." Wheatley was thus a pioneer in the development of the tradition of the African American jeremiad found in the writings of David Walker and other nineteenth-century emancipationists.<sup>41</sup> She was an African American pioneer in the development of what would come to be called liberation theology, the belief that God favored the oppressed. Her own liberation allowed her to use an ironic tone bordering on sarcasm to close the indictment of slave owners she sent to Samson Occom in February 1774:

The following is an extract of a Letter from Phillis, a Negro Girl of Mr. Wheatley's, in Boston, to the Rev. Samson Occom, which we are desired to insert as a Specimen of her Ingenuity—It is dated 11th Feb., 1774.

*Rev'd and honor'd Sir,*

*I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights: Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa; and the Chaos which has reign'd so long, is converting into beautiful Order, and [r]eveals more and more clearly, the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other: Otherwise,*

39 [Theodore Parsons and Eliphat Pearson], "A Forensic Dispute on the Legality of Enslaving the Africans, Held at the Public Commencement in Cambridge, New England, July 21st, 1773. By Two Candidates for the Bachelors Degree," Boston, 1773. The *Massachusetts Gazette* and the *Boston Weekly News-Letter* advertised the publication of "A Forensic Dispute" on September 9, 1773.

40 Bruce Feiler, *America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story* (New York: William Morrow, 2010). The best-known comparison of American colonists with Old Testament Israelites is probably by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense* (1776).

41 Melvin L. Rogers, "David Walker and the Political Power of the Appeal," *Political Theory* 43, no. 2 (2015): 208–33, 223–24.

*perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian Slavery; I do not say they would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honor upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their Fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the Exercise of oppressive Power over others agree,—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine.<sup>42</sup>*

Phillis Wheatley retained her stance as a “royalist patriot” in the immediate aftermath of the Boston Tea Party. She took part in a lighthearted and flirtatious exchange of poems that celebrated Britain’s cultural and military eminence in the first two issues of the *Royal Magazine*, published in Boston in December 1774 and January 1775 during a period of rapidly deteriorating relations between Britain and its North American colonies. George III reacted to the increasing protests and actions against the economic regime Britain sought to impose on its colonies by sending a fleet of twenty-six ships under the command of Vice Admiral Samuel Graves in the summer of 1774 to patrol the North American coast from Nova Scotia to Florida and to enforce the Boston Port Act. Part of Graves’s charge was to blockade Boston until restitution was made for the destroyed tea. But none of the historical context finds its way into the three poems exchanged between Wheatley and John Prime Iron Rochfort, a seaman in the royal navy patrolling Boston Harbor.

Wheatley did not publicly pledge her allegiance to the revolutionary cause until the fall of 1775. As her “To His Excellency General Washington” demonstrates, she hoped that even the most eminent slave owner in the colonies would ultimately apply the revolutionary ideology of equality and liberty to people of African as well as European descent. Wheatley was probably unaware of just how ironic her appeal to George Washington was. A number of Washington’s slaves took advantage of his absence from his Virginia plantation after 1774 to emancipate themselves by joining the British forces. Washington resisted as long as possible the call to enlist militiamen of African descent among his own troops. When he arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to drive the British out of Boston, he was shocked to see armed black men alongside their white fellow New Englanders. As Wheatley was writing to him in October 1775, Washington was encouraging his officers to stop recruiting blacks. And while Washington was responding to Wheatley in

42 Phillis Wheatley to Samson Occom, dated February 11, 1774, published March 11, 1774, in Wheatley, *Writings*, 119–20.



February 1776, he was telling Congress that although he would begrudgingly allow black soldiers to reenlist because of the troop shortage he was suffering, he discouraged the recruitment of more men of African descent.

Wheatley's poem and the letter that accompanied it established her claim to the status of unofficial poet laureate of the new nation-in-the-making. Wheatley was aware that she was being rather presumptuous in addressing Washington. He was in his camp at Cambridge besieging Boston when she wrote to him from Providence on October 26, 1775 (coincidentally the same day that George III declared to Parliament in London that the colonies were in rebellion):

*I Have taken the freedom to address your Excellency in the enclosed poem, and entreat your acceptance, though I am not insensible of its inaccuracies. Your being appointed by the Grand Continental Congress to be Generalissimo of the armies of North America, together with the fame of your virtues, excite sensations not easy to suppress. Your generosity, therefore, I presume, will pardon the attempt. Wishing your Excellency all possible success in the great cause you are so generously engaged in. I am,*

*Your Excellency's most obedient humble servant,  
Phillis Wheatley*

The poem itself combines a paean to Washington with Wheatley's conviction that the revolutionary ideology of America ("Columbia") has universal application. In language that anticipates Washington's heavenly reward, Wheatley's concluding couplet envisions him supplanting George III as America's patriot king:

Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,  
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.  
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,  
While round increase the rising hills of dead.  
Ah! cruel blindness to Columbia's state!  
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.

Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,  
Thy ev'ry action let the goddess guide.  
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,  
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine. (lines 33–42)

As one of Wheatley's most astute critics has remarked, "Wheatley's poem should be read as a plea and challenge from a Boston refugee, rather than primarily as a poem of praise."<sup>43</sup> Washington used an intermediary to have Wheatley's poem

43 Julian D. Mason Jr., in Phillis Wheatley, *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Mason, rev. and enl. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 164n38.

and letter sent to the editors of the *Virginia Gazette*, who published them on March 20, 1776. Thomas Paine republished them in the April 1776 issue of his *Pennsylvania Magazine, or American Monthly Museum*.

Although Wheatley represents herself in her letter and poem to Washington as deeply invested in the revolutionary cause, she describes herself to her black female correspondent Obour Tanner in February 1776 as “a mere spectator . . . of this unnatural civil Contest.”<sup>44</sup> Wheatley anticipated the way that Ignatius Sancho exploits his social and ethnic status to enable him to assume the position of a disinterested outsider commenting on sensitive subjects. In a letter dated May 4, 1778, Sancho asserts, “I say nothing of politics—I hate such subjects”; and on September 7, 1779, immediately after giving a very circumstantial account of recent military events and their likely political consequences, he insists that “for my part, it’s nothing to me—as I am only a lodger—and hardly that.”<sup>45</sup> The context belies Sancho’s comments, as does the fact that he was the only known eighteenth-century person of African descent who exercised his right to vote for members of Parliament. The discrepancies between the public and private statements and actions of Sancho and Wheatley probably reflect what Du Bois calls the double consciousness of a person of African descent living in a white society. Although the loyalist Sancho and the revolutionary Wheatley could not disagree more about the character of the man Sancho mockingly calls “Washingtub,” they shared a sense of alienation from the societies in which the transatlantic slave trade had placed them.<sup>46</sup> But while Sancho was a member of the British body politic as an enfranchised citizen, Wheatley could only aspire to that status in the United States. Unlike his, her political alienation was real as well as rhetorical.

Phillis Wheatley continued to expose the inconsistency of revolutionary rhetoric. Her “On the Death of General Wooster” was occasioned by David Wooster’s death on May 2, 1777. He had been mortally wounded in battle a few days earlier at Danbury, Connecticut. Major-General Wooster had commanded six Connecticut regiments since 1775. Wheatley’s poem served multiple purposes. It is a eulogy for “a martyr in the Cause of Freedom” in which Wheatley imagines Wooster’s dying speech. Speaking through Wooster, Wheatley again castigates the hypocrisy of fighting for the freedom to enslave others:

But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find  
Divine acceptance with th’ Almighty mind—  
While yet (O deed ungenerous!) they disgrace  
And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race?  
Let virtue reign—And thou accord our prayers  
Be victory our’s, and generous freedom theirs. (lines 27–32)

44 Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, February 14, 1776, in Wheatley, *Writings*, 131.

45 Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview, 2015), 171, 231.

46 Sancho to Mrs. Margaret Cocksedg, November 5, 1777, in Sancho, *Letters*, 160.

Each week between October 30 and December 18, 1779, Phillis published proposals for a second volume of poems, with letters, in the *Boston Evening Post* and *General Advertiser*, without success. The volume was to be dedicated to Benjamin Franklin. Her final unsuccessful attempt to find support for a second volume appeared in the September 1784 issue of the *Boston Magazine*. She composed a patriotic panegyric to General Charles Lee, but the poem remained unpublished until 1863. Wheatley published no more poems between December 1774 and early 1784, when she celebrated the formal end of the American Revolution with *Liberty and Peace, a Poem*. The pamphlet is a celebration of the Peace of Paris that Congress ratified in January. Not surprisingly given its subject, the poem exudes joy and optimism that the postwar economic depression would very soon disappoint. The content and tone of *Liberty and Peace* are self-congratulatory.<sup>47</sup> Wheatley celebrates herself as “th’ prescient Muse” whose “Prophecy” has been “accomplish’d.” She describes the arrival of “Freedom” by self-referentially quoting and emphatically italicizing lines from her earlier poem to Washington: “*She moves divinely fair, / Olive and Laurel bind her golden Hair.*” The humble persona found in Wheatley’s earlier poems has been supplanted by the voice of the prophet. She had personal as well as ideological reasons to be optimistic about the future. She and her husband had recently returned to Boston from more than three years of self-imposed exile to avoid his creditors.

Du Bois imagines that Wheatley “never wavered in the high price she placed on her own womanhood or in her conception of the destiny of her people. . . . The reason for this lay deeper than timidity or fear. The world of Phillis Wheatley lay around the American Revolution and the beginnings of a new United States. Black folk of that day were full of hope. . . . Slavery practically disappeared in Massachusetts before Phillis died and the wave of manumission swept south. Soon it seemed, all men would be free and equal.”<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, Wheatley’s own vision that “So Freedom comes array’d with Charms divine, / And in her Train Commerce and Plenty shine” would not include her, her husband, and most other people of African descent in the new United States of America.<sup>49</sup> Her aspiration

47 *Liberty and Peace, a Poem* is quite similar in subject matter and tone to Rev. John Lathrop’s “A Discourse on the Peace; Preached on the Day of Public Thanksgiving, November 25, 1784. By John Lathrop, A.M. Pastor of the Second Church in Boston” (Boston, 1784). Consequently, rather than having been published at the beginning of 1784, Wheatley’s poem may have been, as Lathrop’s sermon was, occasioned by Governor John Hancock’s Proclamation published on October 28, 1784, calling for a day of thanksgiving on November 25, 1784.

48 Du Bois, “Vision,” 332.

49 Phillis and John Peters were unaffected by two consequential court rulings involving people of African descent made while they were out of Boston. Both were decided on generous applications of the statement in the preamble of Massachusetts state constitution that “all men are born free and equal.” The first case was won by an enslaved woman named Elizabeth, nicknamed Bett or Mum Bett, who gained her freedom in 1781 and promptly appropriated a surname befitting her new legal status: Freeman. In the second case, which began simultaneously with Mum Bett’s, Quok Walker finally won his freedom in 1783 in a ruling by Chief Justice William Cushing that

for the full civic and economic inclusion of people of African descent in the new American identity made possible by the Peace of Paris remained a dream deferred until Du Bois's "Vision" could be realized many decades later.

Wheatley overcame contemporaneous restraints of age, gender, and status to assert her position as the unofficial poet laureate of the nation that claimed to be founded on the principle that all men are created equal. Few today would dispute Wheatley's role as the foremother of "the souls and voices, who, coming after, [have] continued and fulfilled her promise and tradition." Contemporary African American authors, particularly women such as Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, and June Jordan, acknowledge her influence on their own careers and works. As Jordan writes in "Something like a Sonnet for Phillis Miracle Wheatley":

From Africa singing of justice and grace,  
Your early verse sweetens the fame of our Race.<sup>50</sup>

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undermined the institution of slavery in Massachusetts. Although the state had not outlawed slavery, Cushing's ruling that it was unconstitutional meant that any slave who sued for his or her freedom in court would win.

50 Nikki Giovanni, *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni*, ed. Virginia C. Fowler (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 135; Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Boston: Harcourt, 1983), 237; June Jordan, *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*, ed. Jan Heller Levi and Sara Miles (Port Townshend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2005), 424.

## 2: David Walker

### Citizenship, Judgment, Freedom, and Solidarity

Melvin L. Rogers

*The common utility that is drawn from a free way of life is . . . being able to enjoy one's things freely, without any suspicion, not fearing for the honor of wives and that of children, not to be afraid for oneself.*

Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*

David Walker is the author of a single pamphlet.<sup>1</sup> He is not typically treated as a political philosopher for what some believe to be obvious reasons. “*The Appeal*,” writes Tommie Shelby, “is not a formal treatise. It is a rallying cry or manifesto, closer to a sermon than to a learned disputation.”<sup>2</sup> In truth, Walker does not take up, at least not explicitly, what is often considered the perennial questions of political philosophy. There is no articulation of the best polity, no explicit discussion of human nature and its relationship to political organization, no systematic analysis of freedom, rights, or justice, and he rarely if ever mentions the reigning terms of his day used to describe the political foundations of society—namely, democracy and republicanism. Moreover, he seems very explicit about his intentions in the pamphlet to “enter more fully into the interior of this system of cruelty and oppression” in the nineteenth century, thus indicating that his reflections are directed to the horror of the moment.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is difficult to read the title and the larger pamphlet without thinking that he means to call Americans to embrace a social and political vision of equal citizenship and freedom. Precisely because the pamphlet appeals to the judgment of the reader, it not only contains a description of grievances but provides an argument on what might yet address the ills of

<sup>1</sup> David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter Hinks (orig. 1829; University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000). Two things worthy of note. First, I have Americanized the term *coloured* to *colored* in the main body of the paper. Second, this edition of the *Appeal* incorporates the changes Walker made between 1829 and 1830 when he issued three different editions.

<sup>2</sup> Tommie Shelby, “David Walker, *Appeal*, in Four Articles,” in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009): [https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/harvardhoa/1828\\_david\\_walker\\_proclaims\\_that\\_the\\_children\\_of\\_africa\\_will\\_have\\_to\\_take\\_their\\_stand\\_among\\_the\\_nations\\_of\\_the\\_earth/o?institutionId=1019](https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/harvardhoa/1828_david_walker_proclaims_that_the_children_of_africa_will_have_to_take_their_stand_among_the_nations_of_the_earth/o?institutionId=1019).

<sup>3</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 8.

the nation. He is calling blacks to occupy a position in which their equal standing and capacity for freedom come into view. On close inspection, the text revolves around four central political-philosophical themes: citizenship, democratic judgment, freedom, and solidarity.

The pamphlet confronts the reader with a dilemma. Consider the title: *Walker's Appeal, In Four Articles; Together with A Preamble, to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America*. How are we to understand the word *citizens* in this title? By the late 1820s we see a diminution or removal of the rights otherwise extended to black men in Northern states, calling into question the accuracy of the attribution of "citizenship" to "colored" individuals.<sup>4</sup> As suggested by Samuel Johnson's 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language*, the term *citizen* refers to "a freeman of a city; not a foreigner; not a slave" (although we can find a similar definition in antiquity).<sup>5</sup> To be a citizen is to enjoy a legal status of duties, rights, and privileges constitutive of belonging to a city and to be taken by that city as having that status, in contrast to persons that are legally outside the community (as in a foreigner) or legally at the will of another (as in a slave). Citizenship, at least as suggested by Johnson's definition, is dependent on what we might call a recognitive legal relationship located within a bounded community. The problem then is for Walker to show that one need not rely on legal recognition to underwrite one's status as a citizen. His ability to do this is connected to the other important term in the title—the word *appeal*—and the way it reflects a capacity that Walker's rhetorical engagement foregrounds.<sup>6</sup>

Walker's text engages the dominant ideas regarding the presumed cognitive deficiencies of black folks that were used as obstacles to their citizenship by calling them to perform their political standing. To use *citizen* to address "colored" folks at a time when those two terms were seen as incompatible calls out a form of political activity that is not itself dependent on the juridical framework from which blacks were excluded. His use of key terms—*citizen* and *appeal*—exemplifies the ways blacks constituted themselves as political actors at the very moment their ability to do so was called into question or denied. The use of these terms, I contend, brings into sharp relief a presupposition of democratic politics—namely, that ordinary individuals are capable of judging their social world—to which he

4 For extended reflections on this see Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), chap. 1; Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 320.

5 Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary: Selections from the 1755 Work That Defined the English Language*, ed. Jack Lynch (orig. 1755; New York: Levenger Press, 2003), 109; Peter Risenberg, *Citizenship in the Western Tradition: Plato to Rousseau* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

6 I share Stephan Marshall's puzzlement with Walker's use of the word *citizen*, but I part ways in rejecting the claim that this is merely a utopian assertion. See Stephan Marshall, *The City on the Hill from Below: The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 28.

means to awaken his audience. On this reading, citizenship is half constituted and half provoked as a result of the capacity to judge.

This chapter explores the presupposition of democratic politics implicit in Walker's deployment of the term *appeal*. My claim is that *appealing to* is a bidirectional rhetorical practice that affirms the political standing of the claimant and the one to whom the appeal is directed. The word *appeal* captures a way of thinking about one's political standing that is not itself dependent on constitutional endorsement. This is the same logic that the American revolutionary generation used to contest monarchical domination and which African Americans, particularly Walker, deployed to contest white supremacy. "When people use particular words," writes legal scholar Mary Bilder, "they choose among different cultural scripts—they select and create meaning" of possibility in which they embed themselves and the recipients of those words.<sup>7</sup>

Few scholars have attended to what I am here calling the rhetorical quality of Walker's appeal, and few have attended to the implicit political power of the practice of appealing—its desire to call into existence a political status that is otherwise denied. I focus on the practice of appealing that frames the pamphlet in an effort to elucidate the "principle of demotic rationality."<sup>8</sup> Demotic rationality sits at the heart of Walker's thinking—a principle that honors the reflective agency of his audience regardless of station in life or racial designation. There is an important connection among the constellation of concepts thus far employed—appeal, citizen, and demotic rationality—that must be kept in view to orient the reader to Walker's pamphlet. *The practice of "appealing to" does not merely affirm the political standing of claimant and recipient (as embodied in Walker's use of the word citizens); it also presumes the equal capacity of actors to judge (the principle of demotic rationality).* The horizontal standing of persons becomes the basis for vertical relationships of authority.<sup>9</sup>

The significance of the pamphlet does not end with appealing to the judgment of black folks and therefore calling out their citizenly status. That status is not reducible to the cognitive capacities of blacks but must be performatively embodied in the world. Walker repeatedly comes back to the claim that blacks must *act* like free individuals. They must live, as Samuel Ringgold Ward would remark

7 Mary Sarah Bilder, "The Origins of the Appeal in America," *Hastings Law Journal* 48 (1997): 922.

8 Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 63.

9 Cf. John H. Schaar, *Legitimacy in the Modern State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1981), chap. 1; George Shulman, "Thinking Authority Democratically: Prophetic Practices, White Supremacy, and Democratic Politics," *Political Theory* 36, no. 5 (2008): 708–34; cf. George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), chap. 1.

decades later in his *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, an “anti-slavery life.”<sup>10</sup> Although blacks (like all human beings) are endowed by their Creator with a “spirit and feeling” of freedom,<sup>11</sup> Walker is aware that this mere fact does not mean we recognize or will be drawn inexorably to acknowledge the demand of our nature. Our nature is not self-executing. This gap—between our fundamental nature and our comportment—creates the space for interpretive guidance that the *Appeal* means to fill; blacks must, as it were, assume a standpoint from which the meaning of human nature, and in turn the force of freedom, comes into view. This explains his aversion to acting slavishly. For him, African Americans must perform their freedom in order to lay claim to it—that is, the meaning of their nature as free creatures is made true by virtue of its performance.

To tease out the implicit political power of Walker’s pamphlet, I explain the cultural and linguistic practice associated with the term *appeal*. In doing so this chapter explores what people typically meant when they used the word *appeal*. I maintain that these meanings are in the background for Walker. This will allow us to see how the term is associated with a larger rhetorical tradition, how it is capable of calling into existence a political status otherwise denied to African Americans, and how that status affirms the equality between claimant and recipient.

Walker’s goal, however, is far more ambitious than merely calling into existence a political stance. There is a conclusion that he wants to persuade his audience to adopt. As we shall see, to be awake or to be free (Walker collapses these two ideas) is to resist domination. The removal of domination requires not only that one resist it but that one belong to a culture in which the conditions for domination no longer obtain. Walker’s ambition, then, is similar to the ambition of his earlier colonial counterparts who no longer wanted to be the objects of domination. The significant difference is his deployment of this largely republican view of liberty to reimagine the polity along racially inclusive lines. But before we get there, we need to be rightly oriented to the *Appeal*, and this requires elucidating the theoretical apparatus that was otherwise part and parcel of nineteenth-century America.

### **To Appeal: Rhetorical Posture and Demotic Rationality**

Walker was born legally free in 1796 or 1797 to an enslaved father and free mother in Wilmington, North Carolina. During his early years Walker traveled throughout

10 Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-slavery Labours in the United States, Canada, and England* (orig. 1868; New York: Arno, 1968), 43. It should not be inferred that Walker would agree with the specific vision of politics that followed from Ward’s notion of living an antislavery life. For a richer account of Ward see Eric L. Ball, *To Live an Anti-slavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), chap. 1.

11 Walker, *Appeal*, 64.



the South, where he witnessed firsthand the horrors of black life. He spent time in Charleston, South Carolina, which was home to “large numbers of free blacks, numerous employment prospects” and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. As Peter Hinks explains, the AME Church combined a “democratic ideology” with a vision of “black autonomy.”<sup>12</sup> This account of black autonomy, ranging from collective self-governance to ideas of becoming an independent nation, was readily on display in the various insurrectionist activities in the United States despite their failures (think, for example, of Gabriel Prosser of 1800 and Denmark Vesey of 1822) and the successfully revolutionary activity abroad (Haitian Revolution). The political energy of Charleston, coupled with these political events, embodied norms of self-assertion and self-governance. These norms were at work among black individuals, and they shaped the egalitarianism of Walker’s text and his call to blacks to inhabit and perform their freedom.

By 1825 Walker moved to Boston. He soon became a respected member of the Boston community not merely because of his business as a secondhand clothing dealer but also because of his leadership role in the Massachusetts General Colored Association (MGCA), an organization that sought to unite black Americans and combat domination, as well as because of his membership in the African Masonic Lodge and his work as an agent for the newly established black newspaper *Freedom’s Journal*. His famous 1829 pamphlet was published in Boston and distributed along the eastern seaboard through a loose interracial network, emboldening some readers and sparking the indignation of others. The pamphlet traveled well into Georgia and as far west as Louisiana. To be sure, because of earlier insurrectionist scares (e.g., Gabriel’s Rebellion of 1800, Louisiana’s German Coast insurrection of 1811, Camden scare of 1816, and Denmark Vesey scare of 1822 in Charleston), the South was already on edge. But as historian Lacy K. Ford notes, “None of these insurrections and insurrection scares generated the breadth of alarm that followed the circulation of David Walker’s *Appeal* in 1829 and 1830.”<sup>13</sup> Given Walker’s inclusion of a call for rebellion if the nation did not reform, Georgia and North Carolina banned incendiary documents as well as made the teaching of slaves to read and write illegal, with Virginia coming close to doing the same. Violation of those laws came with harsh penalties.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1997), 29, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 330; cf. Clement Easton, “A Dangerous Pamphlet in the Old South,” *Journal of Southern History* 2, no. 3 (1936): 323–34.

<sup>14</sup> For the full intellectual biography of the *Appeal* as well as the expansiveness of its circulation, see Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*. For the legal implications of the *Appeal* on free speech, see Amy Reynolds, “The Impact of Walker’s *Appeal* on Northern and Southern Conceptions of Free Speech in the Nineteenth Century,” *Communication Law and Policy* 9, no. 1 (2004): 73–100.

Because of the actions and emotions it sparked on both sides, the text remains a powerful work in the tradition of American pamphleteering aimed at addressing the physical and mental slavery of black Americans. Similar to the American and African American pamphleteer tradition, Walker knew how important it was that the oppressed assume a public voice.<sup>15</sup> This did not, of course, prohibit cooperation with whites. In his 1828 address to the MGCA, he encouraged blacks to “cooperate with them [white Americans] as far as we are able by uniting and cultivating a spirit of friendship and of love among us.”<sup>16</sup> Still, assuming a public voice, he argued, was the vehicle through which blacks might perform their freedom and thereby lay claim to it more firmly. In this context, the *Appeal* is a rhetorical performance—seeking to call out and honor the demotic capacity of black folks.

The connection between rhetoric and demotic rationality has achieved renewed interest among philosophers of democracy—partly because the art of persuasion abounds in our contemporary democratic society no less than in America’s past.<sup>17</sup> **The battle for America’s soul was and continues to be waged, even if not exclusively, through the following question: who among us will be more persuasive?** We can understand rhetoric in simple terms. Rhetoric is a practice of speaking and writing that seeks to persuade one’s audience; it relies on the audience to judge the content of what is being offered. As Ronald Beiner explains, rhetoric reveals the faculty of judging “by which we situate ourselves in the political world. . . . [It] open[s] up a space of deliberation. In respect of this faculty, the dignity of the common citizen suffers no derogation.”<sup>18</sup>

Rhetoric does important work. To say that rhetoric situates us in the political world is another way of capturing the idea that authority is answerable to our judgment quite independent of and prior to legal recognition. That rhetoric foregrounds demotic rationality as central to the practice of legitimizing authority points to a philosophical and institutional alignment at the heart of the modern notion of politics—namely, that politics should offer its members a means to direct the forces that guide their lives. When Thomas Jefferson, for example, remarked in 1824, “In a republican nation, whose citizens are to be led by persuasion and not by force, the art of reasoning becomes of first importance,” we should understand

15 On the pamphleteer traditions see Bernard Bailyn, “The Transforming Radicalism of the American Revolution,” in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1776*, vol. 1, ed. Bernard Bailyn and Jane Garrett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky, introduction to *Pamphlets of Protests: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790–1860* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1–32.

16 Walker, Document II, appendix, in *Appeal*, 88.

17 On the revival of rhetoric in democratic theory see Bryan Garsten, “The Rhetoric Revival in Political Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 14 (2011): 159–80; cf. Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since “Brown v. Board of Education”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

18 Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3.

Jefferson as acknowledging this alignment rather than asserting that the practice of judging emerges because one is legally endowed with standing.<sup>19</sup> In just this way, historians and literary scholars of the antebellum period rightly highlight rhetoric's role as a political art form through which the public voice of African Americans emerged. Through their public voice they reimagined themselves as a political community, affirmed their equal standing, and offered trenchant criticism of American society and the communities of the West.<sup>20</sup> This illuminates how Walker's title can refer to "colored *citizens*." For him, it is from the perspective of judging that our citizenly status emerges, and the capacity to judge is not constrained by borders. And what invites the judgment of the reader—what elicits their citizenly status—is Walker's appeal to them.

Rhetoric is at work in another equally important sense that reflects the complexity of being answerable. Appealing to someone is crucially about giving and asking for reasons for what we do or the beliefs we hold. The idea is that we are subjects of normative evaluation, not merely the one who is making the appeal but also the one to whom it is directed. It is precisely this idea that stimulates Walker's engagement with his black audience: "Are we MEN!!—I ask, O my brethren! Are we MEN?"<sup>21</sup> Or his claim, directed to both blacks and whites, that the "miseries and wretchedness" of African Americans takes place "in this *Republican Land of Liberty!!!!*"<sup>22</sup>

These formulations, especially the use of exclamation marks and declarative sentences, stage a call-and-response relationship that is deliberative, combative, and expressive of an implicit political-cultural logic. "What are we really," his black readers and listeners are asked to consider, given how we comport ourselves in the face of domination? Is this truly a "*Republican Land of Liberty*," both blacks and whites are urged to question, given the practices of domination at work? Italics, capitalizations, and exclamation marks register the emotional gravity of the issue. One exclamation mark increasing to four or eight "signal[s] not only Walker's (and his reader's) rising voice but also Walker's (and his audience's)

19 Thomas Jefferson to David Harding, April 20, 1824, in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 651.

20 The works that underwrite this point include Thomas J. Davis, "Emancipation Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England: A Note on Four Black Petitions in Massachusetts, 1773–1777," *New England Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (1989): 248–63; Newman, Rael, Lapsansky, introduction to *Pamphlets of Protest*, 1–32; Glen McClish, "William G. Allen's 'Orators and Oratory': Inventional Amalgamation, Pathos, and the Characterization of Violence in African-American Abolitionist Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2005): 47–72; Jacqueline Bacon and Glen McClish, "Descendants of Africa, Sons of '76: Exploring Early African-American Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 36 (2006): 1–29; Ivy Wilson, *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 1.

21 Walker, *Appeal*, 18. The reader may be concerned about the gendered language at work in Walker's text, I shall come back to this in the next chapter.

22 Walker, *Appeal*, 5.

rising anger.”<sup>23</sup> At one level Walker’s grammar and punctuational practices reflect the inner emotional states of the writer, but at another level those emotional states are what they are because of the significance of freedom and domination to the Western imaginary. The written protocols on display are not errors of the printer; rather they are choices by Walker and are critical to the meaning of the text. Walker’s formulations coupled with the punctuation prompt the recipient to linger and probe—to probe their own actions and inactions and the surrounding social and political context. As Walker says, I offer my reflections and questions for you to “digest.”<sup>24</sup>

Readers and listeners are pushed, then, to grapple with these considerations because the impassioned and accusatory tone of the text is directed to issues that would seem to matter to the recipient. The pamphlet relies on the audience’s deliberative capacities through a process of questioning that seeks to induce reflective consideration. And the text uses compositional practices that stage argumentative exchanges in an agonistic spirit. Taken together, they form one mode of rhetorical engagement against the backdrop of an ongoing and always incomplete set of traditions. This is part of the practice of giving and asking for reasons: provide an account, Walker is asking, of *why* one should think we “are men” or *why* one should believe we live in a “*Republican Land of Liberty*.” To say they must provide an account is to treat the recipient as one responsive to reasons—one capable of judging.

Precisely because citizenship and judgment are connected through the principle of demotic rationality, Walker intends his pamphlet not merely to be read *by* educated blacks but also to be read *to* uneducated and often illiterate black folks. He therefore discourages his audience from connecting the civic significance of the *Appeal* to a literate public, despite the importance he accords literacy in a context where African Americans’ reasoning capacities were constantly under assault.<sup>25</sup> Hence he says at the very outset of the *Appeal*: “It is expected that all colored men, women and children, of every nation, language and tongue under heaven, will try to procure a copy of this Appeal and read it, or get someone to read it to them.”<sup>26</sup> In this remark he offers a compelling way of understanding his *Appeal*; it is a tool to vivify one’s political standing. As a journalist confirms in the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* of 1830 regarding the impact of the *Appeal* and the transformed self-conception that developed in its wake: “It is evident they

23 Marcy J. Dinius, “‘Look!! Look!!! at This!!!’: The Radical Typography of David Walker’s *Appeal*,” *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (2011): 60. I lean on Dinius’s wonderful article for this paragraph.

24 Walker, *Appeal*, 13.

25 Walker, *Appeal*, 34–36. For a more substantive analysis of the importance of literacy to Walker, see Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), chap. 1.

26 Walker, *Appeal*, 2.

have read this pamphlet, nay, we know that the larger portion of them have read it, or heard it read, and that they glory in its principles, as if it were a star in the east, *guiding them to freedom and emancipation*.”<sup>27</sup> Focusing on the linguistic and cultural norms associated with the practice of appealing will help us get clearer about the status it calls into existence and its demotic character.

### Norms of an Appeal

The term *appeal* was commonly used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as part of the petitionary genre and carried a distinct meaning. Some of the more famous texts of this genre include Samuel Adams’s “An Appeal to the World, or a Vindication of the Town of Boston” (1769), Isaac Backus’s “An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty” (1773), Moses Mather’s “America’s Appeal to the Impartial World” (1775), James Lowell’s “An Appeal to the People on the Causes and Consequences of a War with Great Britain” (1811), Robert Purvis’s “Appeal to Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disfranchisement, to the People of Pennsylvania” (1837), and Angelina Grimké’s “Appeal to Christian Women of the South” (1838). It should not be surprising that the last two people, Robert Purvis as an African American abolitionist and Angelina Grimké as a women’s rights advocate and abolitionist, are members of historically excluded groups. In citing these texts I do not mean to take up the substance of the arguments they advance. Rather, I mean to direct attention to the shared aim of enlisting the judgment of their audience, understood in various ways as a locally defined community or larger collectivity such as “people” or “impartial world.”

Central to the petitionary genre of the day, these documents presuppose an authority whose judgment is capable of deciding the matter at issue. As Susan Zaeske explains: “At its core a petition is a request for redress of grievances sent from a subordinate (whether an individual or a group) to a superior (whether a ruler or a representative).”<sup>28</sup> This way of understanding a petition is folded into the appeal itself. In John Cowell’s 1607 legal dictionary, *The Interpreter*, for example, we find the following definition: “Appeal is used in our common law . . . as it is taken in the civil law: which is a removing of a cause from an inferior judge to a superior.”<sup>29</sup> In Nathan Bailey’s 1721 text, *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, we find a similar definition: “a removing of a cause from an inferior judge or court, to another.”<sup>30</sup> More than a century after Cowell’s description, Johnson

27 *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, September 28, 1830 (emphasis added); see also Walker, Document X, appendix, in *Appeal*, 109–10; cf. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, chap. 5; cf. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, chap. 1.

28 Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery and Women’s Political Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 3; cf. Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 223.

29 John Cowell, *Interpreter: Or Booke, Containing the Signification of Words* (London, 1637).

30 Nathan Bailey, *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, (London, 1721).

defines *appeal* as “a provocation from an inferior to a superior judge, whereby the jurisdiction of the inferior judge is . . . suspended, in respect of the cause.”<sup>31</sup> And finally, in Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, we find the following two definitions: “to refer to a superior judge or court, for the decision of a cause depending, or the revision of a cause decided in a lower court,” and “to refer to another for the decision of a question controverted, or the counteraction of testimony or facts; as, I appeal to all mankind for the truth of what is alleged.”<sup>32</sup> I will say a word about the legalistic dimension of these definitions in a moment.

What should initially be observed is the shared sense that some issue is to be reheard or retried. When Walker says in what might be considered the second preamble of the 1830 edition of the *Appeal*, “All I ask is for a candid and careful perusal of this third and last edition,” he too means to have a retrying of the issue.<sup>33</sup> When he recapitulates the tragic facts of black subordination (article I), restates what he perceives as Jefferson’s demeaning descriptions of blacks and their complicity in their subordination (articles I and II), details the role of preachers in sustaining slavery (article III), and levels criticism against the presumed legitimacy of various colonization plans to remove blacks from American soil (article IV), he should be read as re-presenting facts that might be heard anew.

No place was this more clearly on display than in *Freedom’s Journal*—the first African American periodical with which Walker was closely associated, which emerged only two years before the original publication of the *Appeal*. “We wish to plead our own cause,” wrote editors Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm to their patrons in the first issue of the paper in 1827. “Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly.”<sup>34</sup> The very construction of the claim intends to address degrading descriptions of blacks in circulation. After all, markers of African descent denoted a blight—a constructed but virtual social identity that, as Hosea Easton noted in his neglected treatise of 1837, possessed a “kind of omnipresence” that followed “its victims in every avenue of life.”<sup>35</sup> For this very reason Walker follows Cornish and Russwurm, prodding black folks: “We, and the world wish to see the charges of Mr. Jefferson refuted by the blacks *themselves, according to their chance; for we must remember that what the whites have written respecting this sub-*

31 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1 (London, 1755).

32 Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York, 1828).

33 Walker, *Appeal*, 2.

34 Samuel Cornish and John Brown Russwurm, “To Our Patrons,” *Freedom’s Journal*, March 16, 1827, 1. For a more extended history of *Freedom’s Journal* see Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom’s Journal: The first African American Newspaper* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2007).

35 Hosea Easton, *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States; and the Prejudice Exercised Towards Them*, in *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton*, ed. George R. Price and James Brewer Stewart (orig. 1837; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 105.

ject, is other men's labors, and did not emanate from the blacks."<sup>36</sup> The practice of an appeal—both its implicit use by Cornish and Russwurm and its explicit invocation by Walker—was a “second chance to cry injustice” and, importantly, to have it properly redressed.<sup>37</sup> This practice served, crucially, as a method for forging a collective identity against misrepresentations in circulation.<sup>38</sup>

To retry the issue brings to mind the term's juridical quality. But we conclude too quickly if we confine our thinking in this way and, in turn, obscure what Walker is doing. Both *Freedom's Journal* and the *Appeal* move within the public rather than legal sphere. As Bilder argues, the term *appeal* is inseparable from colloquial—that is, publicly familiar—usage that transcends legal recognition, informs a discursive community, and frames their understanding.<sup>39</sup> This endows the conduct and experiences of individuals with significance and intelligibility not reducible to a legalistic framework. The legal definitions above rely on, but do not fully capture, this background culture. Although locally on display in the United States, this background culture was part of the larger political-philosophical discussion in the West regarding the meaning of freedom.

In the context of the pamphleteer tradition the term *appeal* carries an expansive vision of political power. The term is also emblematic of an underlying political re-orientation. In the next section we will reflect on the changed political orientation from which the appeal emerged. What should be noticed at this juncture is that American colonists and African American activists are united by the experience of having their political standing denied. But ironically, to petition or to appeal involves performing a status that is otherwise not legally endorsed or recognized.<sup>40</sup> And yet petitioning calls forth authority. How so? Petitioning always proceeds from a social practice suffused with shared norms and expectations about what one is doing when one petitions. In this case, the shared understanding is that to petition or to appeal means seeking redress from an authority regarding one's

36 Walker, *Appeal*, 17, cf. 30.

37 Bilder, “Origins of the Appeal in America,” 942.

38 On the significance of black periodicals in circulating alternative narratives see Todd Vogel, “The New Face of Black Labor,” in *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Todd Vogel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 37–54; Frankie Hutton, *The Early Black Press in America: 1827–1860* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993), pt. 1; Robert S. Levin, “Circulating the Nation: David Walker, the Missouri Compromise, and the Rise of the Black Press,” in *Black Press*, 17–36; Bacon, *Freedom's Journal*.

39 Bilder, “Origins of the Appeal in America,” 920–21; Cf. Mary Sarah Bilder, *The Transatlantic Constitution: Colonial Legal Culture and the Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), chaps. 2–4.

40 This description of the petitionary genre draws on Elizabeth R. Foster, “Petitions and the Petition of Right,” *Journal of British Studies* 14 (1974): 21–45; Morgan, *Inventing the People*, 223–30; Zaeske, *Signatures*, chap. 1. What is important to observe is that when read together, Foster, Morgan, and Zaeske can be seen as tracking the historical movement from the formal supplicatory quality of petitions in the sixteenth century to their informal subversive quality in the nineteenth century.

grievances. Petitioning tacitly reflects a normative attitude *about* oneself but also *about* one's social and political world—that is, as being capable of responding appropriately to the claims being advanced. The petitioner is thus hailing and calling forth an authority that is supposed to answer.

This carries political implications for those who found themselves alienated from power to give direction to their lives (e.g., the American colonists) and was of crucial importance for historically excluded peoples (e.g., African Americans). By virtue of appealing to “colored citizens,” Walker combined a designation that marked exclusion (*colored*) with one that denoted inclusion (*citizens*), both criticizing the America polity for its horrific treatment of blacks while endowing those same individuals with a political status otherwise denied. To interpret Walker's *Appeal* as moving within the public sphere is also to take note of its countervailing goals. Similar to *Freedom's Journal*, Walker sought to generate “a parallel discursive arena” in which to “formulate oppositional interpretations” of the identity, interests, and needs of black folks.<sup>41</sup> This oppositional interpretation begins with the very affirmation of voice and judgment.

The status Walker's text means to elicit from blacks is strikingly reinforced by the responses the text generated from whites. Since Walker offers the text for the “inspection” of the reader, it is no wonder that his accusations and queries generated an equally strident set of disavowals and responses. As one commentator, simply named Leo, remarks in a letter of 1831 to William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*: “[I am] opposed to [the production of the *Appeal*] not because he is a man of color, but because I do not believe that he wrote it.”<sup>42</sup> The letter intends to refute not the claims advanced but that they could have come from an African American. Later that year Garrison published a review of the *Appeal*. In the review by an author simply identified as V, obviously a white male given the overall substance of his reflections, we find the following remark regarding his transformed self-understanding:

I have often heard, and constantly believed, that *Walker's Appeal* was the incoherent rhapsody of a blood-thirsty, but vulgar and very ignorant fanatic, and have therefore felt no little astonishment that it should have created so much alarm in the slave-holding states. . . . It has been represented to me as being . . . worthy of contempt. I have now read the book and my opinions are changed. . . . It is vain to call him incendiary, ruffian, or exciter of sedition. Let those who hold him such, imagine the circumstances of the two classes of our people reversed, and those who now rise

41 Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on “Postsocialist Condition”* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 81; cf. Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 23–35; Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), chap. 2.

42 Letter to the editor, *Liberator*, January 29, 1831.



up and call him cursed will build him a monument, and cry hosanna to the patriot, the herald of freedom.<sup>43</sup>

Still others, such as the legislators of Georgia and North Carolina, sought to fortify slaveholding states by passing legislation that would ban the circulation of the text.

These responses are not without irony. As Walker says, “They [whites] beat us inhumanely, sometimes almost to death, for attempting to inform ourselves . . . and at the same time tell us, that we are beings void of intellect!!!! How admirably their practices agree with their professions in this case.”<sup>44</sup> Walker baits his white reader. The general inconsistency that Walker identifies above is a theme he emphasizes throughout his pamphlet. Either African Americans are devoid of the rational powers that would make them judgment-making beings (in which case the pamphlet requires no response at all), or they have the very capacity that is otherwise denied (in which case their claims regarding their status must be addressed). Herein lies the rub: taking the pamphlet to be a site of evaluation regarding the reasons and arguments offered (as white Americans did), holding, in other words, the text responsible for the claims advanced, is to treat the author as not merely something (*à la* property, for example). Rather, it is to treat the author as a judgment-making being and, in that sense, one who enjoys equal standing—who is *like us*.

### An Appeal as a Horizontal Relationship

Yet describing his pamphlet as an appeal seems a strange thing to do, especially given that Walker means to challenge the domination of African Americans. Let us recall the definition of an appeal from Samuel Johnson: “a provocation from an inferior to a superior judge, whereby the jurisdiction of the inferior judge is . . . suspended, in respect of the cause.”<sup>45</sup> Why use a term that is historically located in a tradition of hierarchy as suggested by this and other legal definitions? Why work out of a genre that, as historian Edmund Morgan rightly explains, involves “supplication” and reinforces “subjection”? Morgan’s analysis sees the petitionary genre as emerging most clearly “from the days when authority rested in the hands of God’s lieutenants” such as popes and kings.<sup>46</sup> Correspondingly, the legal definitions associated with the “appeal” carry this hierarchical imprint.

Yet we move too quickly if we conclude in this way and miss the underlying political reorientation to which the larger petitionary genre as well as the practice of the appeal belongs. By the eighteenth century, the petitionary genre emerges

43 V, “Walker’s Appeal. No. 1,” *Liberator*, April 30, 1831, column A.

44 Walker, *Appeal*, 64.

45 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1 (London: 1755).

46 Morgan, *Inventing the People*, 223.

out of a political culture that views the source of power as no longer emanating from the figure of the king but as emerging from those over whom power will be exercised. The king, as it were, can no longer command blind deference. Rather, authorization is more properly tied to reflective assent commensurate with the “morality of self-governance” in which we each may claim to give direction to our lives.<sup>47</sup> Once authorization is tied to reflective assent, it recasts the meaning of the appeal.

Of course this logic informs the American Revolution (that is, legitimate power must be underwritten by reflective assent), as well as the petitionary genre to which Walker’s pamphlet belongs. To appeal does not refer to a social practice of supplication—a subordinate position of being *merely* ruled. Instead the practice of an appeal presupposes a relationship among equals—Aristotle’s ruling and being ruled in turn. To appeal denotes not only the rhetorical posture of speaking to but also the posture that authorizes another, seeking a judgment regarding the issue at hand.

The hierarchical imprint remains, but its logic is transformed in light of this other, more democratic orientation. The horizontal standing among persons (i.e., addresser and addressee) frames how vertical relations of authority emerge. Walker’s salutation is appropriately directed to “fellow citizens” because he means to signal that individuals enjoy equal status and he must therefore, as John Schaar and George Shulman note, “elicit [their] assent.”<sup>48</sup> This is the hallmark of demotic rationality—that each of us can reflectively engage the important decisions of our political world.

Walker authorizes his audience, and he in turn must await their judgment regarding the claims advanced. The logic of “being ruled” most certainly reflects a posture of submitting oneself to a higher authority, but it is a higher authority that alternates between the collective judgment of black folks and the wisdom of those who claim to lead. This point is evident in the original “Preamble” when he describes his role vis-à-vis his fellow citizens as one who seeks to “awaken a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness . . . !”<sup>49</sup> In this, he takes it upon himself to assume a position of authority, but one always in need of recommitment. The ability and authority to arouse his audience point to the significance of their role in bring about lasting social and political transformation.

47 I should not be read as suggesting that this way of legitimizing power was materially realized. It was not. Rather I am noting a changed self-understanding internal to modernity that makes talk of popular assent and individual consent intelligible. This cultural shift is in line with what Jerome B. Schneewind describes as a shift from the “morality of obedience” to the “morality of self-governance” (see Jerome Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 4).

48 Schaar, *Legitimacy in the Modern State*, 25; Shulman, “Thinking Authority Democratically,” 710.

49 Walker, *Appeal*, 5 (original emphasis).

### Demandingness of Freedom

What does it mean to be awake? Walker's answer is that to be awake is to be free. Freedom requires that we see ourselves as thinking, intending, feeling, and norm-obeying individuals. For him, being free requires a kind of comportment in the face of forces that aspire to distort one's life through domination. Freedom is a precondition for living a life that we would properly recognize as human—a life consistent with the demand of our nature as God created us—without which one can only be viewed as a slave. The status of freedom thus depends on our conduct, indeed our self-description. If this is correct, Walker is not exclusively interested in the use of our judging capacity (although important), but he means to point to a proper alignment between the responsiveness of judging and acting in the world.

To make good on this last part, I first take up Walker's invocation of God for understanding the relationship between nature and development. That we are created in God's image points to an affordance of our nature, but that claim matters only if we see and comport ourselves in the right way. This prepares the way for Walker's educational intervention. His argument about development allows for a careful elucidation of two examples that sit at the heart of article II of the *Appeal*—the complicit slave woman and, paradoxically, the enslaved freedman. The examples centralize the importance of blacks' acting as free individuals in the face of domination—the last and final political philosophical theme of the pamphlet. Importantly, Walker does not rely primarily on his theological argument about how we are created to motivate action; rather he means to persuade black Americans to inhabit a kind of identity that is commensurate with that nature as a step toward human flourishing. The examples illuminate what happens in the absence of adopting a particular normative attitude—black Americans will become accessories to their own domination.

### NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT

We might begin with a passage that appears in article IV of the *Appeal*, although its meaning is echoed in earlier articles:

Man is a peculiar creature—he is the image of his God, though he may be subjected to the most wretched condition upon earth, yet the spirit and feeling which constitute the creature, man, can never be entirely erased from his breast, because the God who made him after his own image, planted it in his heart; he cannot get rid of it.<sup>50</sup>

The pain and suffering we endure as part of this world may be exacting, but it can never reach the substance of our nature. This too, Walker argues, applies to the

<sup>50</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 64; cf. 7, 27.

effects of slavery and domination. But what constitutes the creature man? His answer is freedom: “if we lay aside abject servility, and be determined to *act* like men, and not brutes—the murderers among the whites would be afraid to show their cruel heads.”<sup>51</sup> Walker contrasts abject servility—a characteristic suitable of a slave—to being a man. The latter is not merely a descriptive term (i.e., what one finds in nature) but more importantly a normative one (i.e., how we should or ought to understand humans).

What Jeremy Waldron says of the religious content of John Locke’s position, for example, I think applies to Walker as well.<sup>52</sup> He does not merely use the descriptive subject “man” and then add normative content as its predicate. He means to say that the meaning of “man” (the Subject) as God’s creation is constituted by the normative content (the Predicate) without which one could not properly understand us or recognize us as humans. The subject and predicate are interlaced—it is an “unconquerable disposition,” he says earlier—reflecting our construction by God and in his image.<sup>53</sup>

This normative picture of “man” explains why Walker is concerned about an important element of modern slavery—the efforts to define blacks as outside the human family. He takes up this point specifically in article I, “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Slavery,” and repeats the point in article II, “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Ignorance.” Whereas classical slavery, he argues, confined itself to the subordination of different peoples (Egyptians subordinating the Israelites, for instance), it did not include the “insupportable insult upon the children of Israel, by telling them they were not of the human family.”<sup>54</sup> Modern slavery, he maintains, differs on just this point. “Can the whites deny this charge? Have they not, after having reduced us to the deplorable condition of slaves under their feet, held us up as descending originally from the tribes of Monkeys or Orang-Outangs?”<sup>55</sup>

Of course slavery is an evil, but he is especially concerned with the additional claim that blacks do not belong to the human family. Why is this so important beyond it lacking grounds of defense? The answer has to do with the demeaning quality of slavery in its racialized form. Slavery is a description of debasement (not only an “insupportable insult” but what he calls a “gross insult”)<sup>56</sup> that dis-

51 Walker, *Appeal* 64–65 (emphasis added).

52 Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, chap. 3, especially 47–48. I do not mean to imply a total similarity between my line of inquiry and Waldron’s. I do not see Walker as being concerned with that epistemic feature on which liberty and especially equality depend.

53 Walker, *Appeal*, 27. Importantly, given the status Walker accords God throughout the *Appeal*, one cannot merely categorize Walker’s position, without qualification, as naturalism. For this recent description of the foundation of Walker’s account of the person see Leonard Harris, “Walker: Naturalism and Liberation,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 49, no. 1 (2013): 93–111.

54 Walker, *Appeal*, 12; cf. 21.

55 Walker, *Appeal*, 12.

56 Walker, *Appeal*, 12.

avows the moral standing of persons by treating them as less than human. When the meaning of slavery is accepted, Walker argues, it has catastrophic moral consequences. The affordance of our nature remains obscure or unclear to us. This is precisely why the chapter is so named—"Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Slavery." Although Walker rails against slavery's daily cruelties, his concern is with *his audience's relationship to the background description that makes such cruelties possible*. Walker's focus is with how we understand ourselves given the description we come to accept and how acceptance of that description opens or closes possibilities. It is the primacy and acceptance of the claim that blacks do not belong to the human family that is the source, he argues, of African Americans' wretchedness in consequence of slavery and ignorance.

But there seems to be a problem with this account. On the one hand, we have an unconquerable disposition or nature that is defined as free. Yet on the other hand, this account seems to be flimsy since we might very well come to accept some other description of our fundamental nature. We are not instinctually drawn to take up one view rather than another. So the concern bears on the force of our nature. For our nature to be unconquerable, it seems to lack the power that term implies.

This reading of the *Appeal* is correct, but I want to suggest that the flimsiness of our nature helps to centralize the importance of education and performance in Walker's thinking. Nature, in other words, is only one part of what Walker means to illuminate. What I am suggesting here is that (a) this issue acknowledges the limit of our nature and (b) that limit points to a task—work to be done. Consider his language from an earlier section of article II: "Ignorance, my brethren, is a mist, low down into the very dark and *almost* impenetrable abyss in which, our fathers for many centuries have been plunged."<sup>57</sup> Or consider another formulation taken from the passage above: "The feeling and spirit which constitute the creature, man, can never *entirely* be erased." In both instances Walker means to tell his audience that there are limits to how far distortion and ignorance can go. The unconquerable disposition remains, but our understanding of our nature can be deformed because of slavery or hidden from view because of ignorance. So it can be partially erased to the extent that we are blinded to it and the comportment that should follow from it. We might liken Walker's thinking to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous image of our nature in his *Discourses on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Mankind*: "The human soul, like the statue of Glaucus which time, the sea and storms had so much disfigured that it resembled a wild beast more than a god, the human soul, I say, altered in society . . . has in a manner so changed in appearance as to be scarcely distinguishable."<sup>58</sup> Tellingly, Rousseau means to attribute deformation to consequences of modern society, suggesting

<sup>57</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 21 (emphasis added).

<sup>58</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind*, ed. Susan Dunn (orig. 1753; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 81.

that just as we are *deformed* through our activities in time, so too might we also *reform* ourselves by comporting ourselves differently. Rousseau has much to say about the importance of education in helping us do so. As with Rousseau, for Walker the normative force of nature is not self-executing but hinges on properly informed activity.

As with eliciting the judgment of his readers, Walker's emphasis on performativity constitutes his response to Jefferson's demeaning views of blacks, rather than a direct argumentative refutation. Jefferson's claims in query XIV of his *Notes on the State of Virginia* engage in what is taken for the time as a scientific analysis of the physical, intellectual, and moral endowments of African Americans.<sup>59</sup> The inner workings of blacks are presumed to be determinative of their outer comportment. For this reason Jefferson concludes his analysis with an important claim that Walker cites: "This *unfortunate* difference of color, and *perhaps* of *faculty*, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people."<sup>60</sup> Because someone of Jefferson's status backs the claim, Walker rightly perceives it (regardless of what Jefferson said or intended elsewhere) as causing harm to the status of freedom for black people. He remarks: "Mr. Jefferson . . . has in truth injured us more, and has been as great a barrier to our emancipation as anything that has ever been advanced against us."<sup>61</sup> Walker does not respond to Jefferson's arguments by offering a contrary scientific analysis. He is not interested in waging the battle on the grounds of physiology specifically or natural history more generally. Proceeding differently, he writes: "I'm glad Mr. Jefferson has advanced his positions for your sake; for you will either have to contradict or confirm him by your *own actions*."<sup>62</sup> Walker reverses the mode of inquiry, treating activity—the outer performance of blacks—as indicative of their nature.<sup>63</sup>

The emphasis on performance or activity is not meant to throw out Walker's religious anthropology. It does important political and ethical work. After all, Walker does maintain that "God made man to serve Him *alone*, and that man should have no other Lord or Lords but Himself—that God Almighty is the *sole proprietor* or *master* of the WHOLE human family, and will not on any consideration admit of a colleague," suggesting that those who abandon their freedom or deny freedom

59 Jefferson, *Notes*, 264–71.

60 Cited in Walker, *Appeal*, 29 (emphasis Walker's); Jefferson, *Notes*, 270.

61 Walker, *Appeal*, 29.

62 Walker, *Appeal*, 30 (emphasis added).

63 Famously Frederick Douglass does the same in his assessment of the humanity of African Americans, but now as a criticism of white Americans. He treats comportment toward African Americans as affirmation that white Americans believe them to be fully human: "The manhood of the slave is conceded. It is admitted in the fact that Southern statute books are covered with enactments forbidding, under severe fines and penalties, the teaching of the slave to read or to write. When you can point to any such laws in reference to the beasts of the field, then I may consent to argue the manhood of the slave" (Frederick Douglass, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip Foner [Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999], 195).

to others invite God's wrath.<sup>64</sup> The claim, not unlike Locke's in the *Second Treatise*, is that because we each belong to God, we are each protected from being the property of another.<sup>65</sup> And Walker derives a duty to resist slavery from his religious anthropology.<sup>66</sup> On this point he agrees with African American abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet's 1843 remarks to the National Negro Convention in Buffalo that "the forlorn condition in which [blacks] are placed, does not destroy [their] moral obligation to God."<sup>67</sup>

Still, we must take care not to misunderstand the remarks above. For the claim about duty is not free-standing; it does not exist apart from our orientation to the larger framework that grounds that duty. If one accepts that we are created in God's image, having a special obligation to him, the conditions we find ourselves in (though horrible they may be) do not absolve us of that obligation. For Walker, the entailments of such a standpoint are currently not in view because of the wretchedness of slavery and ignorance. To bring such a standpoint in view is also to awaken African Americans to the demand it makes upon them. And with that, let us turn to his two signature examples.

#### COMPLICIT SLAVE WOMAN

Walker aims to "show the force of degraded ignorance and deceit among" black Americans. He refers to an article of 1829 from the *Columbian Centinel*—a prominent Boston newspaper—that gives an account of sixty slaves, some of whom managed to get free in Kentucky while being transported from Maryland to the Mississippi. Those responsible for the slaves included Gordon and his two companions Allen and Petit. Although Walker transcribes the entire article, it is worth looking at a small selection:

The men were hand-cuffed and chained together, in the usual manner for driving those poor wretches, while the women and children were suffered to proceed without incumbrance. It appears that, by means of a file the negroes, unobserved, had succeeded in separating the iron which bound their hands, in such a way as to be able to throw them off at any moment. . . . At this moment, every negro was found

<sup>64</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 7.

<sup>65</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1689/2003), chap. 2, §6.

<sup>66</sup> For a contrary reading see Harris, "Walker: Naturalism and Liberation," 97.

<sup>67</sup> Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States" (1843), in *Black Nationalism in America*, ed. John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 71. And of course Garnet was influenced by Walker, issuing an edition of the *Appeal* prefaced by a biographical sketch written by him and concluding the edition with his 1843 address. For a full account of Garnet's speech see Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.), chap. 8.

to be perfectly at liberty; and one of them seizing a club, gave Petit a violent blow on the head and laid him dead at his feet; and Allen, who came to his assistance, met a similar fate. . . . Gordon was then attacked, seized and held by one of the negroes, while another fired twice at him with a pistol, the ball of which each time grazed his head, but not providing effectual, he was beaten with clubs and left for dead. . . . Gordon . . . not being materially injured, was enabled, by the assistance of one of the women, to mount his horse and flee.<sup>68</sup>

After quoting the article Walker writes: "I want you to notice particularly in the above article, the *ignorant* and *deceitful actions* of this colored woman. I beg you view it candidly. . . . What do you think of this?"<sup>69</sup> His query is sincere, but he provides some guidance in assessing the situation.

Although Walker goes on to discuss the actions of the black men also mentioned in the newspaper article, it is a black woman to whom he first directs the reader's attention. His point is that black women also fall prey to ignorance, implicating them in their own domination and the domination of those similarly situated. When Walker refers to the woman as ignorant, he means she is unaware of what the situation demands. We might liken the situation, to borrow a modern example, to a blind spot—an area just outside of a driver's visual field.<sup>70</sup> The woman displays the normative attitude of a slave, leading to a moral blind spot. As Walker says, despite the freedom that the context creates, the "servile woman" nonetheless assists Gordon *as if* she were not in a state of perfect liberty. But the reader is also meant to bear witness to something having to do with the relationship of the other slaves to the woman: there was no good reason for the men to believe that one who was equally enslaved would act in a way to aid the enslaver. This is why the *actions* are considered deceitful; they deceive those who rightly expect her actions, given the context, to be otherwise.

What should we make of all this? The woman is caught in a double bind. She is bound by an expectation she does not see and therefore bound by a betrayal she does not acknowledge. An individual so caught becomes a coparticipant in her own domination and in the domination of others without recognizing it. But it may seem odd that Walker shuffles in blame, labeling her actions deceitful. Difficult as it may be to note, he is very much concerned to distinguish between a normative judgment about the woman's actions and a normative judgment about her capacity for freedom. Her actions are out of step with what it means to be a free human being, and this is because she lives under the weight of slavery. This need not mean that she is unable to recognize the offense against freedom that her actions represent.

Despite the woman's position, Walker refuses to extend pity to her or encour-

68 Walker, *Appeal*, 25–26; "Affray and Murder," *Columbian Centinel*, September 9, 1829.

69 Walker, *Appeal*, 26 (original emphasis).

70 Cf. Barbara Herman, *Moral Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 99.



age pity from the others. In fact, he tells his audience, “the actions of this black woman are really insupportable.”<sup>71</sup> Here again, the target is her actions. The rationale is not as callous as it may first appear and is connected to the epistemic egalitarianism discussed above. As he says, one who “will stand still and let another murder him, is worse than an infidel, and, if he has common sense, ought not to be pitied.”<sup>72</sup> Pity is often extended to those whose condition, although unfortunate, can never be like our own. It looks downward on the condition of others, often smuggling in condescension toward the suffering person and affirming feelings of deserved advantage in oneself. When applied to this context, it takes on a specific meaning. To pity the woman would be to pity the absence of common sense, and this is precisely what Walker rejects. Such a position may reinforce the view of blacks often used to challenge their equal standing.<sup>73</sup>

The term *common sense*, and the related formulations that appear throughout the *Appeal* such as *sense*, *sound sense*, and *good sense*, is not unusual in the nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> Such terms were used often among the American revolutionary generation, as well as by African American abolitionists with varying political programs such as Daniel Coker, Robert Purvis, and William Whipper.<sup>75</sup> Common sense means for Walker, as it did for many, an ordinary way of seeing things about which there is no need for debate and to which we all have access. The epistemological significance of the term extends to political life precisely because of its social leveling implication—the belief that regardless of our station in life, we are all endowed with a basic and equal capacity for understanding and judging the world around us. This logic is the hallmark of the practice of the appeal.

There is something odd at work when common sense is mentioned, as we see in Walker’s text. As Sophia Rosenfeld rightly points out of the term more generally, no one invokes “common sense who is not convinced that it is under assault or fast disappearing.”<sup>76</sup> Walker is no different. He mentions this capacity precisely to deny the claim—currently in circulation—that black Americans are without it. Paradoxically, he discourages pity in order to affirm the equal access of the black woman and those like her to common sense. His argument is undoubt-

<sup>71</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 28.

<sup>73</sup> Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 42–43; cf. Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>74</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 14, 30, 35 (“sense”); 24, 28 (“common sense”); 32 (“sound sense”); 34 (“good sense”).

<sup>75</sup> Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), chaps. 4–5; Daniel Coker, “A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister” (1810), in *Pamphlets of Protest*, 54; Robert Purvis, “An Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disfranchisement, to the People of Pennsylvania” (1837), in *Pamphlets of Protest*, 136; William Whipper, “To the American People” (1837), in *Early Negro Writing: 1760–1837*, ed. Dorothy Porter (Baltimore: Black Classic, 1995), 205.

<sup>76</sup> Rosenfeld, *Common Sense*, 73.

edly directed to his listening and reading public, and its upshot should not be understated. Despite the view of African Americans in circulation, he contends, common sense belongs to black women and men alike and therefore is not the sole property of whites.

We should linger a bit longer on this point. Walker is outlining something important for his reader about the connection between equality and liberty, tying together his reflections here with those previously discussed. By invoking common sense, he reminds the audience of the norm implicit in the practice of appealing—namely, our equal capacity to judge. Recall that it is the capacity to judge that is the foundation of our status as citizens and explains the title of his pamphlet. He now connects this argument to his claim about freedom. The defense of common sense as a property of black folks runs alongside his claim that although the feeling and spirit of freedom may well be silenced, it can never disappear from our nature. To say the woman's actions are ignorant and deceitful is not to say she is without a basic and equal capacity to recognize the offense against freedom that domination represents. And more importantly, Walker suggests, neither is his audience.

The point is less about the woman described in the story and is more about the readers and listeners of the *Appeal*. She is a stand-in for Walker's audience, an embodied identity through which the effects and affects of servility and domination are discernible. And by considering her actions he means to disrupt the logic of these forms of comportment. For him, so long as black folks—men and women alike—think of themselves as unresponsive to the injury of racial domination because they lack common sense, the more they must see whatever limitations they have (even when brought on by the institutions of slavery and practices of domination) as limitations for which they cannot be held partially responsible and from which they cannot be freed. For Walker, this concedes too much ground; it invites the claim that blacks are incapable of acting as free humans should and therefore are rightly treated as unequals. This rejects what our nature affords us as human beings—a capacity for freedom and therefore a capacity to recognize when that freedom has gone unrealized.

#### ENSLAVED FREE MAN

After leaving the example of the complicit slave woman, Walker turns his attention to the enslaved free man. The analysis seeks to reveal how racial domination radiates outward, influencing the standards black Americans set for themselves. Walker extends the analysis above of the complicit slave woman. But Walker also asserts the necessity of racial solidarity as a result of racialized domination. This second point also doubles back to his example of the complicit slave woman, since she is seemingly unaware of the need to stand in solidarity with those equally enslaved.

Walker's treatment of racial domination points to the constraints on those

blacks that are putatively free. He means to illuminate the way racial domination infiltrates the very self-understanding of black Americans. Consider the following example of what I call the enslaved free man:

I met a colored man in the street a short time since, with a string of boots on his shoulders; we fell into conversation, and in course of which, I said to him, what a miserable set of people we are! He asked, why?—Said I, we are so subjected under the whites, that we cannot obtain the comforts of life, but by cleaning their boots and shoes, old clothes, waiting on them, shaving them &c. Said he, (with the boots on his shoulders) “I am completely happy!!! I never want to live any better or happier than when I can get a plenty of boots and shoes to clean!!!!” Oh! How can those who are actuated by avarice only, but think, that our Creator made us to be an inheritance to them forever, when they see that our greatest glory is centered in such mean and low objects?<sup>77</sup>

There are two arguments here, the latter of which will lead to a third. The first is captured by the last sentence. Precisely because the man is only concerned with monetary gain, Walker argues, he is unaware of the evaluative structure in which his status as a bootblack is located. This directs us to the second argument relating to the force of racial domination, the way it constrains and conditions one’s self-description. Racial domination limits us even where there is no obvious person acting in the role of a master. This should bring to mind the example of the complicit slave woman, who, in a condition of perfect liberty, nonetheless runs to the aid of her enslaver. This leads to the third point, not referenced in the passage, regarding Walker’s assertion of racial solidarity.

Walker does not have an aversion to labor that helps provide for one’s family and basic subsistence. What he does object to is setting one’s sights no higher than cleaning and shining the shoes of white folks. “For if we are men,” he explains, “we ought to be thankful to the Lord for the past, and for the future. Be looking forward with thankful hearts to higher attainments than *wielding the razor* and *cleaning boots and shining shoes*.”<sup>78</sup> Walker’s language is part and parcel of the complicated politics of racial uplift or respectability politics common among Northeastern black intellectuals. At a minimum, uplift ideology is a way of talking about political, spiritual, and economic autonomy—what Erica Ball refers to as the “intrinsic value of respectability.”<sup>79</sup> Walker thinks there is more to life than shining shoes and shaving faces.

Two observations should be noted. First, Walker’s uplift ideology must be appropriately contextualized. His deeper concern is with a class of persons (blacks) that are structurally confined to specific jobs in order to serve another class of

<sup>77</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 31.

<sup>78</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 31 (original emphasis).

<sup>79</sup> Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life*, 30.

persons (whites). When he argues that black Americans are not an inheritance of whites, he does so in order to upset the link between America's developing market economy and white supremacy. The most intense form of this connection, Walker says, is having black people "work without remunerations for our services." In dramatic fashion, he queries the enslaver: "May I not ask to fatten the wretch and his family?"<sup>80</sup> On the one side, then, Walker's criticism of the bootblack might well appear complicitous with the dominant descriptions of blacks because of the ease with which it marks this man as comfortable with his position. And yet, on the other side, it subverts such descriptions by calling into question the genuineness of the man's freedom. Uplift ideology or respectability politics was a way to highlight the transformative power of freedom: "its ability to remake an individual into a new being elevated to a higher state" that was not itself determined by the standards of white Americans.<sup>81</sup>

That the bootblack is actuated by avarice only serves to obscure the limit that has been placed on his aspirations and in turn the structural inequality in which he participates that is fundamentally shaped by white supremacy. The black man confuses the fact that he cleans shoes because he has no choice with the idea that he cleans shoes because he has freely chosen that profession. The bootblack's aspirations are unwittingly tethered to the constrained expectations that are generally set for blacks in America—namely, that they are meant to serve precisely because their lives are worth less than their white counterparts' lives. Walker's point is that black Americans are perceived as useful only for work of this kind and that acceptance of this view (blacks "*glorying* and being *happy* in such low employments") reaffirms their unequal and unfree standing.<sup>82</sup> The evaluative structure that deems blacks as inferior and that is responsible for southern and western enslavement thus radiates outward, influencing one's own self-description.

Second, one might think that Walker's conception of freedom places an inordinate demand on black Americans, undercutting their ability to isolate and savor moments of liberty, however slight, that come under conditions of domination. In this context one might think of Frederick Douglass's final passage of his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, where he describes both feeling like a slave and yet feeling a "degree of freedom" while speaking at an antislavery convention in New Bedford, Massachusetts.<sup>83</sup> Walker's analysis seems not to admit of such gradations that might explain the reaction of the bootblack to his situation. But this is to miss the crucial distinction at work in this comparison. Unlike the bootblack, Douglass is well aware that he enjoys the most superficial aspects of freedom. Indeed, throughout the *Narrative* and his later autobiographies, Douglass outlines the stages of ascent to emancipation, marking the degrees of

80 Walker, *Appeal*, 55.

81 Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life*, 30.

82 Walker, *Appeal*, 31 (original emphasis).

83 Douglass, *Narrative*, 80.

freedom experienced and the aspects of freedom that go unfulfilled because of racial domination. This is precisely why Douglass says, following the quoted line above: "From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren."<sup>84</sup> What is striking about the bootblack is that he believes his situation exhausts what freedom means and what it makes possible. By virtue of this belief, he ironically participates in his own domination. This much Walker says to his audience: "You may therefore, go to work and do what you can to rescue, or join in with tyrants to oppress them [black Americans] and yourselves."<sup>85</sup>

This last point moves us, finally, to his affirmation of solidarity. What, then, is demanded of the bootblack and those like him? What should the observer make of all of this? Walker's response to those who are putatively free, like Douglass's response, is precisely what he thinks one should rightly expect from the complicit slave woman—that is, to ally with those similarly situated. Speaking of the bootblack, Walker says to his audience: "I advanced it therefore to you, not as a *problematical*, but as an unshaken and forever immovable *fact*, that your full glory and happiness, as well as all other colored people under Heaven, shall never be fully consummated, but with the entire emancipation of your enslaved brethren all over the world."<sup>86</sup> This is a clarion call for solidarity as a fundamental element in securing black liberation.

<sup>84</sup> Douglass, *Narrative*.

<sup>85</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 32.

<sup>86</sup> Walker, *Appeal*, 32.

### 3: Martin Delany's Two Principles, the Argument for Emigration, and Revolutionary Black Nationalism

Robert Gooding-Williams

#### Introduction

To students of African American politics and political theory, Martin Robison Delany (1812–85) is principally known as the “father” of Black Nationalism, and not without reason. For more than half a century before Marcus Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association “to assist in the development of independent Negro Nations and Communities,” and more than a hundred years before Malcolm X declared that “[a] revolutionary is a black nationalist. He wants a nation,” Delany counseled racially oppressed blacks residing in the United States to emigrate to Central America, South America, or the West Indies, and, several years later, to Africa, to establish a separate black nation-state, demanding “Africa for the African race, and black men to rule them.”<sup>1</sup> As several scholars have recently argued, however, Delany was not simply a black nationalist, for depending on the political and sometimes personal concerns at hand he also endorsed integrationist agendas.<sup>2</sup>

The freeborn son of a free seamstress and a plantation slave, Delany spent much of his childhood in Charles Town, Virginia (now West Virginia), his birthplace, and his teenage years in western Pennsylvania. In 1831 he moved to Pittsburgh, where he began to study with Lewis Woodson, a minister and a school-teacher who championed black emigration to Canada and the West Indies. Some five years later, and still subject to Woodson’s influence, Delany himself drafted a plan for an expedition to East Africa, the point of which would have been to establish a black “nation, to whom all the world must pay commercial tribute.”<sup>3</sup> Roughly a decade hence, however, he joined Frederick Douglass to coedit and

1 Marcus Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, ed. Amy Jacques-Garvey (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 38; Malcolm X, “Message to the Grass Roots,” in *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove, 1990), 10. Martin R. Delany, “Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party,” in *Martin Delany: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 356.

2 See, e.g., Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Robert S. Levine, introduction to *Martin Delany: A Documentary Reader*; and Tunde Adeleke, *Without Regard to Race: The Other Martin Delany* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).

3 Martin R. Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States and Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1852), 226.

publish the *North Star*, an abolitionist newspaper that advanced a vision of racial integration. It is well known that Delany revisited his separatist agenda in the 1850s, after he was dismissed from Harvard Medical School due to his color and after Congress enacted the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. But his later, less well known political involvements, especially during the Reconstruction era, echo the integrationist sensibility that informed his collaboration with Douglass in the 1840s.

Delany, then, was a more complicated political figure than is often assumed. It is still arguable, however, that most of his speeches and writings—stretching from the separatist, antebellum works that made him famous (*The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* [1852] and *Political Destiny of the Colored Race* [1854]) to the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction *University Pamphlets* [1870] and *Principia of Ethnology* (1878)—express a unified political philosophical outlook that neither professional philosophers nor students of black politics have begun fully to appreciate. Indeed I am inclined to the view that throughout Delany's intellectual and activist career, the same basic principles organize his political thought, whether integrationist or separatist.

Although the present chapter lays the groundwork for defending this view, its primary focus is Delany's argument for emigration. Specifically, I concentrate on the aforementioned extended separatist speech of 1854, the complete title of which is *Political Destiny of the Colored Race, On the American Continent. To the Colored Inhabitants of the United States*. Delany delivered *Political Destiny* to the National Emigration Convention of Colored People held in Cleveland, Ohio. It was the convention's keynote address, and it was eventually published as part of the convention proceedings. In several respects, moreover, it can be read as an extended implementation of some of the key ideas sketched in the convention's "Platform, or Declaration of Sentiments."<sup>4</sup> That is not surprising, for Delany himself may have written the platform. Delany was chairman of the convention's business committee, which, on the opening day of the convention "reported, through their Chairman, a Platform for the Convention, which, on motion, was received."<sup>5</sup> The platform Delany proposed was unanimously adopted after a "second reading,"<sup>6</sup> and he gave his keynote the following morning and afternoon. It is said that he spoke for more than seven hours.

I focus on *Political Destiny* for several reasons: first, because it is Delany's best-known statement on black emigration and black nationalism; second, because it contains his clearest and most systematic explication of the two fundamental principles he adduces (often implicitly) in this and other speeches and writings—the sovereign principle and the principle of original identity—to argue the case for

4 *Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention of Colored People Held at Cleveland, Ohio, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, The 24th, 25th, and 26th of August 1854; With a Reference Page of Contents* (Pittsburgh: A. A. Anderson, 1854), 23–27.

5 *Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention*, 10.

6 *Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention*, 10.

emigration; most importantly, and third, because appreciating the role that these principles play in Delany's argument for emigration is the key to grasping the unity of his political thought through the many phases of its evolution.<sup>7</sup>

Delany relies on the sovereign principle to elaborate a republican notion of political liberty that supports his critique of racial oppression. He relies on the principle of original identity to justify his call to blacks to emigrate to several possible destinations—Central and South America and the West Indies. The second principle presupposes the first, for the principle of original identity identifies conditions necessary to acquire and maintain political liberty as defined by the sovereign principle. In *Political Destiny*, Delany uses his two fundamental principles to connect his argument for emigration to an argument for black nationalism that is informed both by his analysis of Hungary's involvement in the European revolutions of 1848 and his reliance on nineteenth-century Euro-American racial thought.

In what follows I begin by considering Delany's concept of the sovereign principle, after which I turn to his argument that emigration is the remedy for the United States' failure to include black Americans within the scope of the sovereign principle. I subsequently proceed to Delany's appeal to the principle of original identity and distinguish between two applications of the principle: an application predicated on the notion of a culturally and historically formed nation and an application predicated on the notion of race as type. I conclude by arguing that Delany's racially inflected revolutionary nationalism effectively globalizes the nationalist sentiment that he observed among his European contemporaries. For the Delany of 1854, a revolutionary was indeed a black nationalist for whom resistance to an increasingly global white supremacy required the establishment of secure, independent black nations.

### The Sovereign Principle

"Said a great French writer: 'A free agent, in a free government, should be his own governor'; that is, he must possess within himself the *acknowledged right to govern*: this constitutes him as a *governor*, though he may delegate to another the power to govern himself."<sup>8</sup> Here Delany translates Montesquieu's remark, in his famous chapter on the English Constitution, that "dans un état libre, tout homme qui est censé avoir une âme libre doit être gouverné par lui-même."<sup>9</sup> In Delany's

7 For a careful and insightful account of the argument for emigration as Delany develops it in *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, see Bernard Boxill, "Two Traditions of African American Political Philosophy," *Philosophical Forum* 24, nos. 1–3 (Fall–Spring 1992–93): 119–135.

8 Martin Delany, *Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent*, in *Martin Delany: A Documentary Reader*, 247–48.

9 Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *De L'esprit des lois* (London, 1768), 317 (Eighteenth Century Collections Online: Range 2337). Delany's translation very clearly echoes that



view, Montesquieu's assertion expresses the substance "of the sovereign principle, which composes the *true basis* of [each individual's] liberty."<sup>10</sup> Put precisely, the sovereign principle is the proposition that an individual counts as *politically free*—that is, as enjoying the political liberty of a free agent in a free government—just in case his right to govern himself, and thus to govern (to participate in any government that governs him),<sup>11</sup> is *acknowledged* by the actual rulers, that is, by those who govern. Acknowledgment has a *constitutive* force, Delany maintains, for the proper acknowledgment of an individual's right to self-government *confers* on him the standing of a *free and sovereign citizen* (a "governor") on the model of the Roman *cives ingenui*: the freeborn citizen of a free town who enjoyed "the highest positions of honor and trust."<sup>12</sup>

An important corollary to the sovereign principle is the thesis that only a politically free individual, a sovereign citizen, can delegate to another, his "true representative," his right to govern himself, for no one can delegate an authority that those who govern have declined or otherwise omitted to acknowledge.<sup>13</sup> This, I take it, is what Delany has in mind when he proclaims that "no one . . . can dele-

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of Thomas Nugent, which was first published in 1750. Nugent writes: "As in a country of liberty, every man who is supposed a free agent ought to be his own governor"; see *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (New York: Hafner Press, 1949), 155 (bk. 11, chap. 6). For the purposes of the present essay, further citations of *The Spirit of the Laws* will be to Montesquieu: *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> *Political Destiny*, 247.

<sup>11</sup> Section 8 of the Cleveland Convention's "Platform" states "that to be a freeman necessarily implies the right of the elective franchise" (*Proceedings*, 24), and a note to section 9 defines the elective franchise as "the right of being elevated to every position within the gift of the sovereign people" (27). According to the convention "Platform," then, the enjoyment of political liberty (the political standing of a "freeman") entails the right to be elected to any and all offices of government bearing the imprimatur of the sovereign people. In *Political Destiny*, Delany encapsulates this thesis when he ties the right to govern oneself to the right to govern. It is likely that Delany's thinking on this matter was informed not only by his engagement with Montesquieu but by an instance of Pennsylvania jurisprudence with which he was no doubt familiar—the 1838 opinion of Justice John Fox, of Pennsylvania's Bucks County Court, that because neither enslaved nor free Negroes enjoyed the standing of a "freeman," neither could legitimately assert the right of freemen "to choose an Assembly and to be chosen to it." For an account of Fox's opinion and an illuminating discussion of the historical roots of the distinction between the concept of a "freeman" and the concept of a "free man," see Edward Raymond Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania: Slavery—Servitude—Freedom, 1639–1861* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1911), 169–74, 181–93.

<sup>12</sup> *Political Destiny*, 246. Delany is not an "externalist" with regard to the right to govern oneself, for, as I note below, he holds that right to be inherent and inviolable, and so denies that having that right requires satisfaction of a "recognition" or "acknowledgment" condition through which rights are (in part) constituted (for an illuminating defense of rights externalism, see Derrick Darby, *Rights, Race, and Recognition* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009]). But Delany is an externalist with regard to political liberty, for he holds that one cannot count as politically free—that is, as a free, sovereign citizen—absent the acknowledgment of one's right to govern oneself. I analyze Delany's notion of acknowledgment in the third section of the present essay.

<sup>13</sup> *Political Destiny*, 247.

gate to another a power he never possessed”; that is, he cannot *give an agency* in that which he never had . . . [an acknowledged] right.”<sup>14</sup>

In his analysis of the sovereign principle, Delany distinguishes between “the *rights of citizenship*” and “the privilege of *voting*.” The latter, he remarks, was enjoyed by the Roman *jus suffragii*, a class of individuals who “could vote for one of their superiors—the *Cives Ingenui*—but not for themselves.”<sup>15</sup> In Delany’s view, the condition of “the black and colored inhabitants of the United States” compares to that of the *jus suffragii*, for “in some of the States” they have “the privilege of *voting*, to elevate their superiors to positions to which they need never dare aspire, or even hope to attain.”<sup>16</sup> Although he apparently intends to include all black and colored inhabitants of the United States in his analysis, Delany here highlights the condition faced by *free* blacks residing in states that granted them the privilege of voting. In these states, he argues, the sovereign principle is not satisfied with regard to free blacks, for the white rulers of these states refuse to acknowledge that free blacks severally enjoy an “*inherent and inviolate*” right to self-government (a right to govern themselves), and hence to govern: here, “to elevate” themselves to positions of rule that their white “superiors” reserve exclusively for themselves.<sup>17</sup> Free blacks who enjoy the privilege of voting cannot count as politically free, and so cannot delegate to others an acknowledged right to govern themselves—for none of them possesses such a right. For these blacks, voting cannot be a matter of delegating an authority that each enjoys as a sovereign citizen to a group of true representatives who then may legitimately be held accountable to an obligation to “take a proper interest” in the affairs of those who have voted for them;<sup>18</sup> rather, for these modern *jus suffragii*, none of whom possesses an acknowledged right to self-government to delegate, voting is at best a feckless endeavor, for “where there is no acknowledged sovereignty, there can be no binding power.”<sup>19</sup>

For Delany, white racial oppression obtains when white rulers, because they deny that any black person has the authority to rule himself, and therefore that

<sup>14</sup> *Political Destiny*, 248. Like Montesquieu, Delany moves immediately from a discussion of “a free agent in a free government” to a discussion of political representation. See *Spirit of the Laws*, 159–60 (bk. XI, chap. 6).

<sup>15</sup> *Political Destiny*, 246.

<sup>16</sup> *Political Destiny*, 246. In section 4 of the present essay I discuss Delany’s understanding of the distinction between blacks and coloreds.

<sup>17</sup> *Political Destiny*, 246–47. Regarding the theme of whites denying blacks the right to elevate themselves to positions of rule, see, again, n10 above.

<sup>18</sup> *Political Destiny*, 247–48.

<sup>19</sup> *Political Destiny*, 247. In this paragraph I have not done justice to Delany’s analysis of the categories organizing Roman political life. Neither have I been able to determine the source or sources on which Delany relied for that analysis. One possibility is that he relied on one or another “manual” of Roman antiquities. In 1848, for example, the classical scholar William Ramsay published *A Manual of Roman Antiquities* as part of the Encyclopædia Metropolitana. A second edition of Ramsay’s manual appeared in 1851, published in London by John J. Griffin. Ramsay’s manual includes some discussion of each of the categories of Roman political life that Delany analyzes.

any black person can delegate such authority to a “true representative,” also deny that their power to treat blacks as they please is legitimately bounded, constrained, or otherwise controlled by such authority. Put differently, white rulers collectively oppress black Americans as a group (as a “people”) when, rather than treat them severally as sovereign citizens—or, in other words, as an “essential part of the *ruling element* of the country in which they live”<sup>20</sup>—they disavow the sovereignty of each member of the group, treating each member as well as the collective accordingly—that is, according to the dictates of their unchecked collective discretion.<sup>21</sup>

Notice, however, that government through unchecked discretionary treatment need not rule out in principle the possibility of extending to all blacks a rich schedule of rights and privileges, or, alternatively, of extending some such schedule to some but not all blacks—say, to some free blacks, but not to slaves. And neither need it rule out the possibility of extending to slaves a schedule of rights and privileges different from the one extended to free blacks. What is ruled out, however, is the possibility of regarding any such rights and privileges as justifiable by appeal to an inherent and inviolate sovereignty; rather racial oppression requires that they be regarded as statuses that (1) the white rulers confer where there is no right-based obligation to confer them; (2) may be enjoyed just so long as those same rulers suffer to tolerate them; and (3) the white rulers may rescind by means of a decision that is no less unchecked and arbitrary than the decision that conferred them in the first place.

In sum, where white rulers acknowledge the sovereignty neither of chattel slaves nor free blacks, the outcome for both chattel slaves and free blacks is exactly

20 *Political Destiny*, 247. As I interpret Delany, he holds that the ruling element of a country comprises the set of its sovereign citizens, from which it follows that to count as a sovereign citizen is to count as a part of the country’s ruling element. Each sovereign citizen is an essential part of a country’s ruling element in the sense that his inclusion, through acknowledgment, in the set of sovereign citizens is morally required by his inherent and inviolable right to govern himself. See the Cleveland Convention’s platform, section 18 (*Proceedings*, 26): “That, as a people, we will never be satisfied or contented until we occupy a position where we are acknowledged a necessary constituent in the ruling element of the country in which we live.” For a similar statement, see Delany’s “Call” to the Cleveland Convention in *Martin Delany: A Documentary Reader*, 240).

21 Thus Delany seems to hold that acknowledged sovereignty is the only normative candidate that white rulers would or could entertain as a basis for legitimately checking and controlling the exercise of their power to rule blacks. Like Montesquieu, in his discussion of the English Constitution, Delany connects political liberty to individuals’ interest in feeling safe and secure (see, e.g., *Spirit of the Laws*, 157 (bk. XI, chap. 6) and *Political Destiny*, 246–48). But where Montesquieu’s discussion of the English Constitution emphasizes that political liberty requires that functionally separate organs of government check each other’s power, Delany, taking his bearing from at least a part of that discussion, stresses that blacks’ political liberty would require the satisfaction of an acknowledgment condition that effectively checked the power that whites exercise over blacks (cf. fn. 11 above). For helpful discussion of Montesquieu in this connection, see Sharon Krause, “The Spirit of the Separation of Powers in Montesquieu,” *Review of Politics* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 231–265 and Jeremy Waldron, *Political Liberty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), chaps. 3 and 4.

the one that Delany had earlier described in *Condition*: a shared *political* servitude where neither free blacks nor chattel slaves take any part in government or benefit from true representation, and both groups have whatever rights and privileges they have due to the “sufferance” and discretion of their rulers.<sup>22</sup> In short, Delany conceptualizes racial oppression as a form of what republican and neorepublican political theory dubs “domination”—that is, subjection to arbitrary rule. In a related vein, he conceptualizes political liberty as requiring *nondomination*.<sup>23</sup>

### Acknowledgment and the Argument for Emigration

Delany addresses *Political Destiny* to his fellow colored “countrymen,” remarking that the “object” of his speech is to establish “the improbability of realizing our desires, and the sure, practicable remedy for the evils we now endure.”<sup>24</sup> Deliberately declining to address his audience either as *citizens*—“because such you have never been”—or as *freemen*, “because such privileges have never been enjoyed by any colored man in the United States,” he addresses them, in effect, as individuals who share certain desires, preeminent among which is a political desire to enjoy the standing of freemen and sovereign citizens that has never been fulfilled.<sup>25</sup>

Delany defends the proposition that if his fellow colored countrymen eschew immoral means for satisfying that political desire, then “ages incalculable might reasonably be expected to roll around” before that desire could “honorably” be fulfilled within the United States.<sup>26</sup> Taking that proposition as a premise, moreover, he plausibly infers that, barring the implementation of some such means, colored people must emigrate elsewhere if ever they are to enjoy the standing of freemen and sovereign citizens. In other words, he infers that emigration beyond the United States is a necessary condition for any and every colored individual currently inhabiting the United States to obtain political liberty<sup>27</sup>—which, again, an individual can be said to possess only if the sovereign principle is satisfied in his person, that is, only if his right to govern himself is acknowledged by those who actually govern.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Condition*, 44–45.

<sup>23</sup> The contemporary philosophical literature on the notion of freedom as nondomination is now vast. But much of it still pivots around this writings of Philip Pettit, which combine historical and analytic treatments of that notion. See, e.g., Pettit’s *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), and more recently his *On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Melvin Rogers’s “Race and Republicanism: Reflections on Early African-American Political Thought,” unpublished ms., includes insightful discussion of both Delany and Pettit.

<sup>24</sup> *Political Destiny*, 245.

<sup>25</sup> *Political Destiny*, 246.

<sup>26</sup> *Political Destiny*, 248–49.

<sup>27</sup> See, again, n10 for the connection between political liberty and standing as a “freeman.”

<sup>28</sup> Here, as elsewhere in this paper, I have, following Delany, tended to use masculine pronouns rather than *his/her*, *he/she*, or gender-neutral pronouns. It is not obvious to me, however,

Delany's argument for emigration is that emigration is a necessary condition for the fulfillment of colored peoples' shared political desire. I have suggested that the inference leading Delany to this conclusion is plausible. But what considerations support the premise that is the basis of this inference? Why does Delany suppose that it is reasonable to believe not only that a genuinely honorable satisfaction of black political desire is "improbable" while blacks remain in the United States but extremely unlikely—a prospect requiring more years and ages to realize than could in principle be counted or otherwise measured?

Delany holds that white Americans have made "their color . . . , by law and custom, the mark of distinction and superiority; while the color of the blacks is a badge of degradation, acknowledged by statute, organic law, and common consent of the people."<sup>29</sup> In addition, he holds that law is sometimes altered, and that modern Europeans' primary mechanism for elevating political inferiors to "the rank of equality" with their superiors has been the enactment of laws that have entirely destroyed the elevated subject's "identity as an inferior, leaving no trace of his former condition visible."<sup>30</sup> In the European case, Delany implies, the enactment of new laws has succeeded in making unequals equal: first, because the new laws have mandated changes in dress and education matching the equalization of political standing; and second, because no color or other visible physical characteristic has served to distinguish former superiors from former inferiors after the new laws were put into effect. But a like enactment of new laws, whether in the form of new statutes or a transformation of organic (constitutional) law, would not establish political equality in the American case, for custom, which, Delany suggests, expresses the common consent of the United States' sovereign people—that is, of its white citizens—would still operate to make the color of blacks a mark of degradation and inferiority.

Delany's reliance on the concept of acknowledgment to explain the establishment of color as a mark of superior or inferior standing resonates with his use of that concept to explain the institution of sovereign citizenship. For Delany, I suggest, acknowledgment is the conferral of standing, or status, due to one or another putatively factual consideration.<sup>31</sup> In the sort of "free government" Delany envi-

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that Delany means to exclude black or colored women from the group of individuals he considers to be his countrymen, or from the group of individuals he considers to have an inherent and inviolate right to govern themselves. My doubt that Delany means to exclude black or colored women is motivated by the consideration that a number of persons who actively participated in the Cleveland Convention were women (see, e.g., *Proceedings*, 8, 14). On the other hand, that Delany adamantly characterizes emigration as what is best for blacks' "manhood" suggests that his primary and perhaps exclusive audience is black men (see *Political Destiny*, 267). For a helpful discussion of Delany's understanding of "manhood," see Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 34–37.

<sup>29</sup> *Political Destiny*, 248; emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup> *Political Destiny*, 248.

<sup>31</sup> For relevant uses of the terms *acknowledgment* and *recognition* in *Political Destiny*, other than those mentioned in the main body of the present essay, see *Political Destiny*, 266, 270, and

sions when he quotes Montesquieu, rulers confer the standing of free sovereign citizen due to the consideration that all men have the right to govern themselves. In the United States, however, where the government is hardly free but characterized by racial domination, white rulers confer the standing of free sovereign citizen on whites due to the consideration that all and only white men have the right to govern themselves, thus rendering their color a mark of distinction and superior standing; similarly, they confer the standing of unfree nonsovereign subject of domination on blacks due to the consideration that no black men have the right to govern themselves, thus rendering their color a mark of degradation and inferior standing. As we have seen, Delany suggests that America's white rulers use custom, statute, and organic law as mechanisms of acknowledgment—that is, to confer both inferior and superior political standing on the basis of color and race. But again, no enactment of new laws would suffice to eradicate that standing, because custom would retain its efficacy as a means of racial domination, the enactment of new laws notwithstanding.

In emphasizing the distinction between custom and law, I highlight Delany's Tocquevillian suggestion that even if the enactment of new laws came to the aid of oppressed black Americans as, Delany suggests, they have come to the aid of oppressed Europeans, custom, or what Tocqueville calls mores (*moeurs*), would continue to latch on to the stigmatized badge of color and so continue to rank blacks as politically inferior to whites.<sup>32</sup> In the United States, Tocqueville argued, the fact of servitude and the fact of racial difference have combined to create a situation where “memories of slavery disgrace the [black] race, and race perpetuates memories of slavery”<sup>33</sup>—or, in other words, where customary practices and habits—the mores—that shape whites' treatment of blacks have entrenched a contempt for blacks that is the result of slavery, the memories of slavery, and the stigma of servitude that attaches to black skin color and sustain those memories. “The law can abolish servitude,” Tocqueville writes, “but only God can obliterate its traces.”<sup>34</sup> Tocqueville “despair[s]” at the prospect of eradicating racial inequality in the United States—that is, “of seeing an aristocracy founded on visible and indelible signs vanish”<sup>35</sup>—because whites' skin color-based antipathy to blacks is so deeply embedded in their mores.

Delany likewise despairs, I want to argue, but his despair exceeds Tocqueville's,

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271. See, too, “Platform,” section 18 (*Proceedings*, 26). Thanks, finally, to Sharon Krause and Dave Estlund for pressing me to say more about Delany's notion of acknowledgment than I was able to say when I presented an earlier version of this paper to the Political Theory Workshop at Brown University.

32 Tommie Shelby has also noted the Tocquevillian tenor of Delany's argument. See Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, 48.

33 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 341.

34 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 341.

35 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 342.

because he denies Tocqueville's thesis that in the modern world, and in the modern United States in particular, changing laws is substantially easier than changing mores.<sup>36</sup> In Delany's view, American custom and law alike express "deep-seated prejudices" animated by "all the malignity and negro-hate" that is "inseparable from . . . [the] very being . . . [of] Christian democrats and American advocates of equality."<sup>37</sup> Delany can in principle entertain the possibility that Tocqueville imagines, but his belief that laws—the 1850 Fugitive Slave law, for example—no less than mores reveal the character, the fundamental identity (the very being), of America's ruling white citizenry, commits him to the proposition that that citizenry is just as unlikely to abolish servitude legally as it is to radically transform its mores.<sup>38</sup>

As I have already suggested, Delany admits that the promotion of immoral means—specifically, the means of "indiscriminate concubinage" (the prostitution of black and colored "mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters" to white men) to eliminate the color differences between blacks and whites—could eventually neutralize the effects of racial custom and law.<sup>39</sup> But rejecting that means, he argues that the prejudices that custom and law entrench and stabilize are so stubborn in their persistence, so fundamentally ingrained in the ethos of America's white citizens, that the fulfillment of blacks' shared political desire is extremely unlikely while they remain in the United States.<sup>40</sup> From this premise he infers, we have seen, that emigration outside the United States is a necessary condition for the satisfaction of that desire.<sup>41</sup>

36 "In antiquity the most difficult thing was to change the law; in the modern world the hard thing is to alter mores; our difficulty begins where theirs ends." Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 341.

37 *Political Destiny*, 248, 250.

38 See, e.g., Delany's remarks on the 1850 law in *Conditions*, chap. 16. For Delany's brief remarks on the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law in *Political Destiny*, see *Political Destiny*, 272. Delany also suggests that it is against the self-interest of the white citizenry to abolish racial oppression. On this point, see *Political Destiny*, 269.

39 *Political Destiny*, 249.

40 My suggestion that Delany means to thematize the ethos or character of the American people follows Melvin Rogers's excellent discussion of Delany in "Race and Republicanism." To Rogers's argument I would simply add that Delany's complicated account of that ethos in *Political Destiny*, which references custom, law, prejudice, Christianity, and the ideal of democracy, like his analysis of the sovereign principle, while not thoroughgoing and systematic, may well reflect his engagement with Montesquieu, and specifically Montesquieu's complicated, arguably holistic account of the relations between a people's spirit, mores, laws, character, and religion. See, e.g., *Spirit of the Laws*, 308–33 (bk. 19).

41 In *Political Destiny*, Delany argues for emigration primarily on political grounds, maintaining that emigration is necessary for blacks to realize their political desire. But not all his arguments are political, for he also wishes to show that the achievement of economic equality—equality in the "competition for a livelihood" (*Political Destiny*, 251)—likewise requires emigration. In the present essay I focus on Delany's political argument for emigration, central to which is the assumption that black Americans share a political desire to enjoy the political standing of freeman and sovereign citizen.

### The Principle of Original Identity

Delany's argument for emigration purports to show that blacks must emigrate to achieve the status of freemen and sovereign citizens. But it gives no answer to the question of *where* blacks should emigrate. To address this question, Delany invokes the "principle of original identity"—the proposition that a people can reasonably hope to acquire and maintain its political freedom only if (1) its members exclusively constitute "the *ruling element*" of a country—its sovereign citizenry—as a consequence of composing a supermajority of its population, or, as Delany succinctly puts the point, "by necessity of numbers,"<sup>42</sup> and (2) an "original identity," or, as he sometimes writes, an "identity of origin," unites that supermajority.<sup>43</sup> Unlike the sovereign principle, Delany's second principle is not an account of the meaning of an essentially contested political concept—in the case of the sovereign principle, the concept of political liberty.<sup>44</sup> Rather it is an empirical generalization, basic to the "fabric of every substantial political structure in the world."<sup>45</sup>

Delany seems to believe that if the members of a people do not constitute a supermajority of a country's population, then either (1) the members of some other people will constitute a supermajority and, by necessity of numbers, its sovereign citizenry, who, in turn, will dominate the minority people(s); or (2) the members of no other people will constitute a supermajority, in which case whatever political liberty the country's sovereign citizens enjoy will be doomed to demise due to the lack of an original identity uniting the country. For Delany, the case of the Canadas exemplifies the first possibility, the case of Hungary, the second.

Although Delany allows that the Canadas may well serve the "fleeing fugitive" as a temporary residence, he writes that "he cannot commend them as permanent

42 *Political Destiny*, 250. When Delany describes the members of a people as constituting the ruling element of a polity, I take him to be saying that the ruling element of the polity in question is wholly and so exclusively composed of the members of the people in question.

43 *Political Destiny*, 250. I assume that Delany uses the terms "original identity" and "identity of origin" synonymously. On my account, Delany holds that blacks must, by necessity of numbers, constitute the ruling element of any country to which they emigrate in order to acquire and maintain their political liberty (as defined by the sovereign principle), not, as Tommie Shelby seems to suggest, in order to "retain or regain" a collective, or original, identity (see Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, 43). Acquiring and maintaining political liberty also requires that black sovereign citizens share an original identity. But as I read Delany, he holds that constituting the ruling element of a country by necessity of numbers is at best necessary but not sufficient to guard against the loss of an original identity. I develop this last point below.

44 For a clear explanation of the concept of an "essentially contested concept," see Jeremy Waldron, "Is the Rule of Law an Essentially Contested Concept (In Florida)?," *Law and Philosophy* 21:137–64.

45 *Political Destiny*, 250. Delany writes not only as a normative political philosopher but also as a political scientist concerned to adapt his knowledge of "political structure" to the demands of black political desire—an aspiration that resonates with Tocqueville's call for a new political science that would adapt government and the understanding of statecraft "to the needs of time and place." See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 12.



places upon which to fix our destiny, and that of our children.”<sup>46</sup> And that is “because the Canadas—as all British America—at no very distant day, are destined to come into the United States.”<sup>47</sup> But even were the United States never to annex its neighbor to the north, “the odds are against [blacks]” in the Canadas, because “the *ruling element* there, as in the United States, is, and ever must be, white—the population now standing, in all British America, two and a half millions of whites, to but forty thousand of the black race; or sixty one and a fraction, whites, to one black!”<sup>48</sup> In short, whites constitute a supermajority of the Canadian population (and indeed of the entire British American population) and so, by necessity of numbers, cannot but constitute the sovereign citizenry of the Canadas to the exclusion of other races. Thus were American or any other blacks to emigrate to the Canadas, they “might never hope for anything more than to exist politically by sufferance—occupying a secondary position to the whites of the Canadas.”<sup>49</sup>

Regarding Hungary and its part in the European revolutions of 1848, Delany writes that “the downfall of Hungary, brave and noble as may be her people, is mainly to be attributed to the want of identity of origin, and, consequently, a union of interests and purpose.”<sup>50</sup> Expanding on this explanation, he adds:

Hungary consisted of three distinct “races”—as they called themselves—of people, all priding and claiming rights based on their originality—the Magyars, Celts, and Slaves. On the encroachment of Austria, each one of these races—declaring for nationality—rose up against the House of Hapsburg, claiming the right to self-government, premised on their origin. Between the three a compromise was effected—the Magyars, being the majority, claimed the precedence. They made an effort, but for the want of a unity of interests—an identity of origin—the noble Hungarians failed. This fact, it might not have been expected would be admitted by the great Magyar.<sup>51</sup>

For the purposes of the present paper, the accuracy of Delany’s explanation of the failure of the Hungarian Revolution is less important than his use of that explanation to explicate the principle of original identity. After declaring its independence from Austria, Hungary was not able to maintain its autonomy, for the Hungarians were divided among themselves, lacking a unity of interest and purpose. The Magyars constituted a *majority* of the newly independent nation, but apparently *not a supermajority* whose members would, by necessity of numbers, make up Hungary’s ruling element to the exclusion of the Celts and Slaves.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Political Destiny*, 249. See, too, 275.

<sup>47</sup> *Political Destiny*, 249.

<sup>48</sup> *Political Destiny*, 249–250; emphasis mine.

<sup>49</sup> *Political Destiny*, 250.

<sup>50</sup> *Political Destiny*, 250.

<sup>51</sup> *Political Destiny*, 251.

<sup>52</sup> By “majority” Delany may well have meant relative majority (that is, plurality), for as late as 1840, less than a decade before the Hungarian Revolution, “only about forty percent of Hun-

Each of these peoples proclaimed *a right to govern itself*—that is, a right to establish itself as the supermajority of the population of an independent polity (an independent Magyar polity, an independent Celt polity, or an independent Slave polity) and, as a result, as exclusively constituting the ruling element of that polity.<sup>53</sup> But rather than press that claim, each agreed to a compromise such that none of them constituted a supermajority of the new Hungary. Again, the Magyars constituted a majority, but with no one people constituting a supermajority bound together by one and the same set of interests, Delany's noble Hungarians fell prey to debilitating internal conflict that spelled the defeat of their revolution and the destruction of their political liberty.<sup>54</sup>

It is through his examination of the Canadian and Hungarian cases that Delany defends the thesis that black Americans must emigrate to a country where blacks constitute a supermajority of the population if they are to acquire and maintain their political liberty. Recall, however, that the principle of original identity states in part that a people can acquire and maintain its political liberty only if its members constitute a supermajority that is united by an *original identity*. As we have

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gary's population spoke Magyar as its first language" (George Gömöri in *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era 1760–1850*, ed. Christopher John Murry [New York: Routledge, 2013], 542). According to Louis Kossuth himself, "the Magyars were equal in numbers to almost all the rest of the people, and almost twice as numerous as those speaking any other dialect" (see Kossuth in *New England*, ed. Ralph Waldo Emerson [Boston: John P. Jewett, 1852], 113).

53 For Delany, a people's right to govern or rule itself is, in an important sense, rooted in the individual's right to govern himself. Specifically, he claims that a "people, to be free, must necessarily be their own rulers: that is, each individual must, in himself, embody the essential ingredient—so to speak—of the sovereign principle," which essential ingredient, we have seen, is the acknowledgment of the individual's right to govern himself (*Political Destiny*, 247). What are we to make, then, of Delany's later claim that the Magyars, Celts, and Slaves each claimed a right to govern themselves premised on the principle of the original identity? In my view, the second claim is consistent with the first, for in invoking the principle of original identity against the House of Hapsburg, each of these peoples was simply saying that it could reasonably hope to satisfy its right to self-government, and thus acquire and maintain its political freedom, only if, by necessity of numbers, it established itself as exclusively constituting the ruling element of a polity. In each case, the invocation of the right to self-government could be said to "premise" the principle of original identity, inasmuch as each of the peoples in question held that the realization of a desired end (the satisfaction of the right to self-government) required a means necessary to the realization of that end (having the people in question establish itself, by necessity of numbers, as exclusively constituting the ruling element of a polity).

54 Delany's reference to the Magyars and Slaves (Slavs) is historically apposite. But none of the secondary literature I have consulted suggests that the Celts played a role in the Hungarian Revolution. I suspect that Delany may have had the Croats rather than the Celts in mind, but I am not sure. It should be noted, moreover, that Delany's claim that the Hungarian Revolution failed due to internal conflict is controversial. Historian Eric Hobsbawm takes the opposing view, arguing that "alone among the revolutions of 1848, the Hungarian one did not fall or ever look like falling by internal weakness and conflict but by overpowering military conquest" (see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875* [New York: Vintage Books, 1975], 19). That is hardly to deny, however, that internal conflict among different nationalities was crucial to the evolution of events both before and during the course of the revolution. On this point, see, e.g., Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848–1851*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 103–5, 143–47.

seen, Delany's discussion of Hungary indicates that having an original identity involves having common interests and purposes. In addition, it seems to presuppose that whenever the members of a people constitute a supermajority of a country's population, they will share an original identity. Delany rejects this claim, however, for he contends that the members of such a people or nation can "lose their original identity" and that "just so soon must that nation or people become extinct."<sup>55</sup> How is that possible? How is it possible for a people to lose their original identity?

For Delany, a people can be said to have common interests when those interests make a claim on each of its individual members and so function as a sort of "nucleus," or "centre of attraction," that draws them together and prompts them to act in concert to advance those interests.<sup>56</sup> The Cleveland Convention's "Platform" gets at the same idea when it states that "that no People can maintain their freedom without an interested motive and a union of sentiment as a rule of action and neuclus [*sic*] to hold them together."<sup>57</sup> In Delany's view, a people have common interests when they are united in the sentiment that certain purposes matter and feel motivated to advance those purposes. But when the interests they have collectively avowed cease to claim them—when, in other words, their care for and desire to advance those interests wane and grow faint—then those interests no longer define them. In effect, they lose their original identity, "become extinct" as a people, and suffer the demise of their political liberty. Such was the fate of "Egypt, Carthage, Rome, and the former Grecian States."<sup>58</sup>

Given black Americans' political desire to enjoy the standing of freemen and sovereign citizens, Delany held that a prudent application of the principle of original identity advised that they emigrate to a country where (1) blacks constitute a supermajority of the population, and therefore the ruling element, and (2) where blacks' sentimental and motivational attachment to their common interests is strong, vital, and not soon subject to decline and demise. In addition, he may have held that a prudent application of the principle to the Hungarian case would have led Louis Kossuth ("the great Magyar") and other political leaders to avoid compromise in the interest of establishing independent Magyar, Slave, and Celt polities. But notice, now, a possible difference between the two cases. When Delany discusses the Hungarian case, he puts the term *races* in scare quotes, thus suggesting that original identities need not be conceptualized in racial terms—that, perhaps like Kossuth, he believed that a people's common interests and purposes may well be rooted in its history, institutions, and laws,<sup>59</sup> or, as he himself suggests in his discussion of white Americans' racial prejudice, in the cultural ethos

<sup>55</sup> *Political Destiny*, 250.

<sup>56</sup> *Political Destiny*, 250.

<sup>57</sup> "Platform," in *Proceedings*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> *Political Liberty*, 250.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, *The Life of Louis Kossuth with His Public Speeches in the United States, and a Brief History of the Hungarian War of Independence* (Budapest: Osiris Kiado, 2001), 93.

evident in its customs and laws. When he discusses the case of black emigration, however, Delany turns explicitly to the category of race and, as we shall see, to a central strand of nineteenth-century Euro-American racial science. In short, Delany may have granted that law, history, and ethos can play a decisive role in forming and determining a people's, or a nation's, original identity, but when he considers the case of black emigration he locates the origin of original identity in racial identity.

Delany argues that blacks should emigrate to three "countries," the West Indies, Central America, and South America, adding, however, that "though we have designated them countries, they are in fact but one country—relatively considered—a part of this, the Western Continent."<sup>60</sup> Calculating the racial demography of this "one country," Delany claims that "only—one seventh of this population, 3,495,714 . . . being white, or of pure European extraction, there is a population throughout this vast area of 20,974,286 . . . colored persons, who constitute, from the immense preponderance of their numbers, the *ruling element* as they ever must be, of those countries."<sup>61</sup> Delany's demographics fuel his argument, for, applying the principle of original identity, he shows that emigration to the West Indies and to Central and South America would satisfy the consideration that blacks should emigrate to a place where they constitute a supermajority of the population and, therefore, its ruling element.<sup>62</sup>

Delany likewise argues that emigration to the West Indies and to Central and South America would satisfy the consideration that blacks' should emigrate to a place where their sentimental and motivational attachment to their common interests is strong, vital, and not soon subject to decline and demise. Setting the stage for *this* argument, he makes a case for conceptualizing original identity in racial terms.

"The truth is," Delany proclaims, "we are not identical with the Anglo-Saxon or any other race of the Caucasian or *pure white type* of the human family, and the sooner we know and acknowledge this truth, the better for ourselves and posterity."<sup>63</sup> By invoking the notion of a racial type, Delany here alludes to a set of beliefs—the typological theory of race—that had emerged as an international school of thought (with proponents in the United States, France, Germany, and Britain) by the time he addressed the Cleveland Convention.<sup>64</sup> An example of racial science that is now discredited, the typological theory holds that an individual's racial identity is fixed by his or her physical racial type—that is, by a cluster of morphological traits that he or she has in common with, and only with, mem-

<sup>60</sup> *Political Destiny*, 254–55.

<sup>61</sup> *Political Destiny*, 258.

<sup>62</sup> Delany seems to believe that blacks constitute a supermajority of the population not only of the "one country" in question but of each of the three component countries.

<sup>63</sup> *Political Destiny*, 251; emphasis mine.

<sup>64</sup> See Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 37–38.

bers of the same race. In addition, it claims that racial type differences explain the differences between the clusters of moral, cognitive, and cultural traits thought to distinguish the members of any one race from those of another. Now Delany holds that some blacks, like some whites, embody a *pure* racial type. As we have seen, however, he addresses *Political Destiny* not only to these black and colored individuals but also to colored individuals who embody a mixture of a pure black and some other pure racial type(s). Thus it is with pure black and impure colored persons alike in mind that he writes, “We have then inherent traits, attributes—so to speak—and native characteristics, peculiar to our race—whether mixed or pure blood—and all that is required of us is to cultivate these and develop them in their purity, to make them desirable and emulated by the rest of the world.”<sup>65</sup>

Delany believes that blacks of pure and mixed blood share an original identity that is defined by a set of traits distinctive to blacks (including, presumably, common purposes and interests) and that stems from a *pure black type* of the human family. It follows from this view that if black Americans emigrate to the West Indies and to Central and South America then they will be emigrating to a region where they will share an original identity with the colored supermajority already inhabiting it. As we have seen, however, Delany also believes that a people should never take its original identity for granted and that it would be a mistake not to worry that the black inhabitants of that region stand in danger of losing their racially determined original identity.

Delany sketches two responses to this worry. First, he argues that the West Indians and Central and South Americans care about and feel motivated to protect the interests that unite them, for while they refuse white American emigrants whom they expect to exploit them, they welcome black American emigrants, whom they trust to nourish those interests.<sup>66</sup> Second, and no less importantly, he boldly exhorts his addressees to hold in the highest esteem the dispositions and interests that unite them, proclaiming that “the colored races have the highest traits of civilization” and that “the black race will yet instruct the world.”<sup>67</sup> By praising the colored races, Delany aims to instill in his listeners a prideful concern for and desire to cultivate their shared dispositions and interests—and he expects these prospective emigrants to bring that prideful concern and desire with them to the West Indies and Central and South America.

Delany believes that black Americans can acquire and maintain their political liberty only if they emigrate to a place where (1) blacks constitute a supermajority, (2) an original identity unites that supermajority, and (3) blacks’ sentimental and motivational attachment to that original identity is strong, vital, and not soon

<sup>65</sup> *Political Destiny*, 252. For especially useful discussions of the typological theory of race, see Banton, *Racial Theories*, 28–64; and Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 43–48.

<sup>66</sup> *Political Destiny*, 258.

<sup>67</sup> *Political Destiny*, 252.

subject to decline. He argues that emigration to the West Indies and to Central and South America will satisfy the third of these considerations because the West Indians and Central and South Americans have already expressed the requisite sentimental and motivational attachment, and because he expects that the black Americans he inspires to emigrate will bring that attachment with them.

### **Conclusion: Revolutionary Black Nationalism and the Spirit of 1848**

When Delany argues that black Americans must emigrate to secure their political liberty, and that they can reasonably hope to secure their political liberty if they emigrate to the West Indies and to Central and South America, he maintains the tone of a philosopher or a theorist. Occasionally, however, he adopts a prophetic tone, as when he proclaims that black American emigration could have a world historical significance that exceeds the concerns of black Americans per se, announcing “that the great issue, sooner or later, upon which must be disputed the world’s destiny, will be a question of black and white; and every individual will be called upon for his identity with one or the other.”<sup>68</sup> Considering black American emigration in a global perspective, and through the lens of Hungary’s participation in Europe’s 1848 revolutions, Delany suggests that a widespread embrace of his vision could have revolutionary significance. When the Magyar’s, Celts, and Slavs declared “for nationality,” he remarks, they were responding to “the encroachment of Austria.”<sup>69</sup> In a similar vein, when Delany declares for nationality—that is, for strengthening and establishing secure and sovereign black nations (nations where blacks constitute the ruling element)—he is responding to whites’ “many encroachments . . . upon the rights of colored races” and, more generally, to the rising tide of global white supremacy.<sup>70</sup> Just as the Magyars suffered “the ponderous weight placed upon their shoulders by the House of Hapsburg,” so too is it a “fact,” Delany insists, that “for more than two thousand years, the determined aim of the whites has been to crush the colored races wherever found.”<sup>71</sup> An angry black Jeremiah, Delany warns that rather than witness “the universal possession and control by the whites, of every habitable portion of the earth,” and so risk “the disgrace and ordeal of Almighty displeasure,” black Americans must seize the time, “grasping hold of those places where chance is in their favor and establishing the rights and power of the colored race.”<sup>72</sup>

As political philosophy, *Political Destiny* is an analysis of the concepts of republican political liberty and sovereign citizenship and an account of the conditions that must be met for racially dominated black Americans to enjoy republican

68 *Political Destiny*, 252.

69 *Political Destiny*, 251.

70 *Political Destiny*, 252.

71 *Political Destiny*, 250, 253.

72 *Political Destiny*, 254.

political liberty and sovereign citizenship. As revolutionary prophecy in the spirit of 1848, however, its rhetoric is more theatrical than analytical, for it envisions the black struggle for political independence as a grand drama on a global scale—that is, as a race war between colored protagonists “tending to a common cause” and the white overlords who everywhere seek to oppress them, a struggle of monumental significance that will decide not only the political destiny of the colored race on the American continent but, ultimately, the *world’s* destiny.<sup>73</sup>

It is beyond the scope of the present essay to examine further the relationship between Delany’s prophetic and political philosophical sensibilities.<sup>74</sup> Still, I conclude these reflections on Delany’s powerful declamation by drawing attention to the former, for attending to the revolutionary spirit in his speech is critical to appreciating the contours of the Afro-modern and black nationalist tradition of political thought that links Delany to Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and other black nationalists.<sup>75</sup> For, again, Garvey echoes Delany when he argues that black emancipation requires the establishment of independent black nations, and Malcolm X echoes Delany when he declares that a revolutionary is a black nationalist because he wants a nation.

73 *Political Destiny*, 252.

74 Michel Foucault’s discussion of the discourse of race war in connection to the discourse of sovereignty in early modern European political thought might well serve as a useful point of departure for further examining this relationship. See Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

75 For the idea of an Afro-modern tradition of political thought that includes black nationalism as one strand, see Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

## 4: Harriet Jacobs

### Prisoner of Hope

Nick Bromell

Harriet Jacobs, the author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), would not have considered herself to be a political theorist, at least not in the conventional sense of the term. The word *theory* derives from the Greek work *thea*. It denotes a way of looking, gazing, or viewing that stands at one remove from the world itself—just as the audience in a *theater* beholds and reflects upon the action in a play.<sup>1</sup> Like many other African American activist thinkers and writers, Jacobs felt herself to be too entangled in her struggle—for a better life for herself and her children—to be able to afford the kind of distanced and detached observation that we associate with the words *theory* and *philosophy*. Indeed Jacobs and many other African American thinkers challenge this Western tradition of theory and philosophy by suggesting that it is delusional to suppose that *anyone* can stand apart from the turbulence of their historical conditions. They also expose the limitations of traditional political philosophy, especially its specious claims to universality. In so doing, they implicitly call all political thought to be more attuned to life as a continuous struggle that is at once beautiful and cruel. When read attentively, these thinkers call for radical changes in conventional political theory, and by doing so they enter into that field, contribute to, and are now transforming it.

Virtually all African American political thinking exposes the unacknowledged racial positioning of white philosophers who do not see, as Charles Mills writes, that “insofar as . . . persons are conceived of as having their personhood uncontested, insofar as their culture and cognition are unhesitatingly respected, insofar as their moral prescriptions take for granted an already achieved citizenship and a history of freedom—insofar, that is, as race is not an issue for them, then they are already tacitly positioned as white persons, culturally and cognitively European, racially privileged members of the West.”<sup>2</sup> As I hope to show in this essay, Jacobs’s work

<sup>1</sup> This standard etymology is the one I subscribe to. In *Traveling Back: Toward a Global Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Susan J. McWilliams offers a provocative twist on it: “In the years after Homer composed his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* . . . many Greek city states commissioned a *theoros* . . . whose job it was to visit foreign city-states . . . and report on what he had seen” (9). If McWilliams is right that traveling lies at the very core of the Greek idea of political theory, then the motionless stasis Harriet Jacobs endures in “the loophole of retreat” is even more intensely a reversal and critique of that tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), xv.



also poses a second fundamental challenge to conventional (white) political theory. Writing specifically as a black *woman*, one whose reproductive powers had been appropriated and exploited by the slavery system, she was warily skeptical of the idea of futurity. And that idea is one of political theory's deepest assumptions. After all, most political theory aims to theorize politics in order to bring about a better political order. Theorists may debate about what "better" means, but they all take for granted that when time passes things can and do change. The disposition to theorize politics thus depends on the belief, usually unstated and unacknowledged, that time will roll forward and the present will be replaced by the future.

As we shall see, Jacobs's *Incidents* works in two ways to challenge this belief. First, she describes many events in her life as moments of failed futurity—moments when what looked like the future turned out to be no more than a continuation of the past and present. Second, as I shall explain in more detail below, she uses a narrative technique that pulls her readers out of their own timeframe (which is a future relative to her present) and plunges them back into her present, which is the moment in which she directly addresses them. For example, when she writes, "And now, reader, I come to a period of my life I would gladly forget," we hear this "now" as a moment when she pauses in her writing, perhaps lifts her pen, and speaks to us from wherever she sits.<sup>3</sup> As readers we go *to* her; we step *back* into that imagined moment, bringing with us the "now" that we actually inhabit. This pulling of *our* now back into the narrator's *now* is doubled, or intensified, by Jacobs's repeated suggestions that even the narrator's *now* cannot escape from an even earlier time frame—her seven years of confinement in the garret above her grandmother's shed. Therefore, insofar as her moments of second-person address call her future readers back into the now of her book's being narrated, and insofar as that now is not separable from the time she spent in what she calls her "loop-hole of retreat," all of her future readers are called to sit *with* her in that cramped and painful place.

That place, however, is precisely where she as an enslaved black woman looks out and sees the slavery system most clearly for what it is. Unlike the conventional empty *space* where theory that takes itself to be unraced and disembodied stands and looks and makes universal claims, Jacobs's *place* is this garret, and it is deeply embedded in her world. Indeed the place from which she sees and theorizes lies in the very belly of the beast of slavery, intensifying her condition of enslavement by holding her a captive within its system of captivity. And one thing that she perceives from that place is that time does not necessarily have a future. For this reason, hers is a political theory that abstains from futurity.

At first glance, such a political theory might seem useless today. But I will try to show that it helpfully pressures conventional political theory to be more heed-

3 Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, edited by Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 53. All further quotations are from this edition.

ful of the need to act *now*, not later. I will also suggest that Jacobs's abstention from futurity pressures her readers today to ask whether they have *good reason* to take their futurity for granted. Perhaps such confidence is no longer warranted. Perhaps climate change and other problems looming in what some geologists call the Anthropocene era require everyone to rethink what political theory is and does. Perhaps this enslaved black woman's thinking reveals that all readers are viewing life from within a loophole of retreat, with much less freedom and with a much less certain future than most of them suppose.

# 1.

Jacobs calls futurity into question most visibly by narrating numerous micro-incidents in which the future turns out to be merely a repetition or an extension of what has already been. Individually, each of these disappointments is hardly noticeable. Taken together, their weight is palpable. To give just several of many examples:

- Jacobs tells us that her grandmother had been emancipated by her master but was later illegally kidnapped and sold back into slavery.
- Jacobs makes a point of telling us that the silver candelabra purchased with the money borrowed from her grandmother would be passed on “from generation to generation” within her master's family—in other words, the original crime would be repeated indefinitely.
- When Jacobs's mother's mistress dies, Jacobs expects to be freed, but this promise is broken and she remains enslaved.
- When she tries to cheer her brother Willie by saying that “bright days will come by and by,” he retorts—getting the last word that is surely authoritative—“You don't know anything about it. We shall have to stay here all our days” (11).
- When her master Dr. Flint breaks up her relationship with a free black man in the town, Jacobs reports that her lover left her “still hoping the day would come when I could be bought,” but “with me the lamp of hope had gone out” (42).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Other examples include the following: She writes of her dead parents that they might have “been kindly taken from the evil days to come”—in other words, that it might have been kind of God to deprive them of futurity. Jacobs reports a conversation in which an enslaved mother says to a trader, “You promised to treat me well,” to which he replies, “You have let your tongue run too far, damn you,” and breaks the promise (13). She recalls, “I went to bed thinking the next day would find me such, perhaps dead. What was my grief on waking to find myself quite well” (19). Of her arrival in the harbor of Philadelphia she writes, “The next morning I was on deck as soon as the day dawned. I called Fanny to see the sun rise, for the first time in our lives, on free soil; for such I then believed it to be” (158). When she is sent to Flint's son's plantation, other enslaved persons there are looking forward to “better times” under a new mistress, but Jacobs tells us: “I had no such hopes for them” (92). And when the mistress herself steps from the carriage, her face brightening, Jacobs surmises that visions of a better future are rising before her: “It made me sad,” she tells us, “for I knew how soon clouds would come over her sunshine” (92).

Sometimes Jacobs casts this failed futurity in which nothing significant changes as the failure of God to answer her prayers. At other times God is actually implored to put an *end* to time because the future seems very likely to be a mere continuation of present suffering. Jacobs tells us, for example, of an enslaved woman whose children have been taken from her, and who exclaims, "I've got nothing to live for now. God make my time short" (70).

This pattern in which a meaningful future fails to materialize continues even when Jacobs hears that her children have been emancipated, even when she escapes to the North, and even when she is bought out of slavery by her employer, whom she calls Mrs. Bruce. (She was actually Mrs. Nathaniel P. Willis; while writing *Incidents*, Jacobs lived with the Willis family in New York and took care of their children.) We expect that in these moments Jacobs would feel that her prayers have been answered. Surely she must have a sense of promises fulfilled, and of a future that breaks from the past instead of merely repeating it. But not quite. For after Jacobs has escaped, she discovers that "Mr. Sands had not kept his promise to emancipate them [her children]" (166). Living with the kind Mrs. Bruce, she begins to become "more energetic and cheerful," but "the old feeling of insecurity, especially with regard to my children, often threw its dark shadow across my sunshine." (This image is repeated many times throughout the book.) Even when Jacobs learns that her cruel master Dr. Flint has died, she doesn't feel relieved, or freer, or in any meaningful sense *done* with him. For "there are wrongs which even the grave does not bury. The man was odious to me while he lived, and his memory is odious now" (196).

This somber feeling that time has no meaningful future overtakes and nearly extinguishes the joy that flickers in the book's final paragraphs. Jacobs and her children are at last "as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north." But although this is "a vast improvement in [her] condition," Jacobs observes, that "is not saying a great deal" because she is still so far from the future she has wished for: "The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own." Jacobs is certainly grateful for the kindness of Mrs. Bruce, but the very words she uses to describe their relationship powerfully invoke the enforced bondage and servitude she has supposedly escaped: "Love, duty, gratitude also *bind* me to her side. It is a privilege to *serve* her." The grip of the past is felt again when the narrator tells us that she would "gladly forget" "the dreary years" she passed in bondage—but cannot. And while she derives some solace from the memory of her departed grandmother, these are merely "light, fleecy clouds floating over . . . a dark and troubled sea" (201).

## 2.

As virtually all scholars of the book agree, Jacobs's intention in writing *Incidents* was to awaken white middle-class women of the North not just to the evils of the slavery system but specifically to its cruel exploitation and abuse of enslaved

black women. Exposing these evils through her own life story, she necessarily thought and wrote *as a black woman*, not a neutral observer. The story she tells is one of political struggle within and against the conditions she experienced as a black woman born into slavery and forced to deal with the evils that the slavery system (often called “the patriarchal institution”) inflicted upon enslaved black girls and women.

Chief among these were sexual predation and abuse, including rape. Such crimes were not frankly discussed in abolitionist literature because readers at the time considered them to be improper topics for public discussion. Jacobs daringly defied this convention by writing an autobiography that made plain the story of her own abuse. But in so doing she exposed herself to the risk of criticism and censure from her readers. To diminish this risk, she devised a sophisticated narrative strategy. On the one hand, she would try to induce her white readers to identify and sympathize with her, even though she was black and enslaved; this required her to appeal to them as fellow women who judged with their hearts, not just their heads, and who themselves knew from personal experience what it felt like to be dominated by men. At the same time, she also had to persuade her readers that “the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others” (56). This meant emphasizing the degree to which her conditions were *different from* theirs, so that their moral rules could not all be fairly applied to her. In sum, she had to appeal to what she and her white female readers had in common even as she also emphasized how different her experience was from theirs. Jacobs negotiated this difficult and narrow path by deftly manipulating what literary critics call “second-person address”—moments when an author seems to speak directly to her readers, addressing them as “you.”

Jacobs’s clever use of second-person address was one of the first things about her work that literary scholars discussed after the rediscovery of *Incidents* in the late 1960s. Initially, however, they noted only the first aspect of her strategy. The thrust of their arguments was that Jacob ingeniously deployed conventions of nineteenth-century narrative in order to make common cause with contemporaneous readers who would otherwise have found her story too unconventional to assimilate and be moved by.<sup>5</sup> As Valerie Smith put it: “By pointing out the similarities between her own story and those plots with which her readers would have been familiar, Jacobs could thus expect her readers to identify with her suffering.”<sup>6</sup> As Smith’s word *identify* indicates, some of these early critics also wished to forge bonds of feminist solidarity between Jacobs and her first female readers. Jean Fagan Yellin, for example, argued that Jacobs’s strategy of second-person address “represents an attempt to establish an American sisterhood and to activate that

5 See, for example, the essays collected in John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner, eds., *The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory* (Macomb: Western Illinois University Press, 1982). Foster on sentimentality in Jacobs, 58.

6 Valerie Smith, introduction to Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxxii.

sisterhood in the public arena.”<sup>7</sup> Thus the main focus of these critics was on the political strategy that Jacobs as a writer employed in order to win the sympathies of her readers and thereby reinforce the burgeoning antislavery movement.<sup>8</sup> Their work was complemented by critics who focused on the agency and activities of Harriet Jacobs when she was still a “slave girl”—her wily and courageous resistance to her master, her subversive strategies of survival, and her eventual heroic success.<sup>9</sup>

These ways of reading *Incidents* soon collided with two critical developments that cast doubt on their assumptions and aims. One was an emerging “politics of difference” that underscored precisely what was different and distinctive about black women’s experience.<sup>10</sup> Critics working in this vein often emphasized the ways Jacobs manipulated rather than merely reproduced the tropes and conven-

7 Jean Fagan Yellin, introduction to Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harvard ed., xxxiii.

8 As we shall see, many other critics of Jacobs have focused on her method of narration. In addition to those cited below, see especially Thomas Doherty, “Harriet Jacobs’ Narrative Strategies: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *Southern Literary Journal* 19, no. 1 (1986): 79–91; Carla Kaplan, “Narrative Contracts and Emancipatory Readers: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *Yale Journal of Criticism: Interpretation in the Humanities* 6, no. 1 (1993): 93–120; Sharon Davie, “‘Reader, My Story Ends with Freedom’: Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. Allison Booth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 86–109; Laura E. Tanner, “Self-Conscious Representation in the Slave Narrative,” *Black American Literature Forum* 21, no. 4 (1987): 415–24; Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolitionism, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 93–104.

9 See, for example, Martha J. Cutter, “Dismantling ‘The Master’s House’: Critical Literacy in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *Callaloo* 19, no. 1 (1996): 209–25; Beth Maclay Doriani, “Black Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century America: Subversion and Self-Construction in Two Women’s Autobiographies,” *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1991): 199–222; Debra Humphreys, “Power and Resistance in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” in *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*, ed. Carol J. Singly and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 143–55; Joycelyn K. Moody, “Ripping Away the Veil of Slavery: Literacy, Communal Love, and Self-Esteem in Three Slave Women’s Narratives,” *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no. 4 (1990): 633–48; Harryette Mullen, “Runaway Tongue: Resistant Orality in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Our Nig*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Beloved*,” in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 244–64; Sidonie Smith, “Resisting the Gaze of Embodiment: Women’s Autobiography in the Nineteenth Century,” in *American Women’s Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, ed. Margo Culley (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 75–110.

10 Hortense Spillers, *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book*, *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81; Frances Foster, “‘In Respect to Females . . .’: Differences in Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Narrators,” *American Literature Forum* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 66–70. Valerie Smith argues that in contrast to the masculine individualism assumed by Frederick Douglass, “Jacobs’s tale is not the classic story of the individual will; rather it is more of a story of the self-in-relation.” *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 38; also Valerie Smith, “Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass,” *American Studies* 35, no. 2 (1994): 73–94.

tions of sentimental and domestic fiction through which she appealed to her white readers.<sup>11</sup> The second was a new sensitivity (doubtless arising from the influence of French historian Michel Foucault) to the myriad ways individuals are formed and disciplined by society and a correlative skepticism toward the very possibility of an individual heroic “subject” with “agency.”<sup>12</sup>

The first of these shifts was elegantly described by Robyn R. Warhol in her article “‘Reader, Can You Imagine? No, You Cannot’: The Narratee as Other in Harriet Jacobs’s Text.” Published in 1995, this article both built on and distinguished itself from Warhol’s earlier (1989) book *Gendered Interventions*, where she had argued that in Victorian fiction moments of second-person address are routinely gendered: male narrators adopt a tone that is “distancing,” while female narrators adopt one that is more “engaging”:

The engaging narrator addresses a narratee [i.e., the implied reader] in a friendly, confiding, sympathetic mode, so as to encourage actual readers to identify with the narratee (whether or not actual readers did so is a subject for another kind of study). By contrast, the distancing narrator—more teasing, insulting, and humorous than the earnest, engaging narrator—introduces an ironic gap between the narratee, or the “reader” addressed in the text, and the person who actually holds the book and reads, thus placing a distance between the actual reader and the narratee. That distance opens up a metacritical space in the textual transaction: the distancing narrator—who emphasizes the fictiveness, the textuality, of a text by drawing the reader’s attention to the way the novel is constructed—keeps literature at an aestheticized distance from the world of active politics.<sup>13</sup>

In the article published six years after the book, Warhol acknowledges that she now has to qualify this argument because in it she had implicitly and unconsciously taken white-authored texts to be narrative norms that could be universally applied to all texts, including texts by black women like Harriet Jacobs. In the years between 1989 and 1995, however, literary criticism’s discovery and embrace of a politics of difference had made plain the error of that assumption. In this sec-

11 Carla Kaplan, “Narrative Contracts and Emancipatory Readers: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *Yale Journal of Criticism: Interpretation in the Humanities* 6, no. 1 (1993): 93–120; Caroline Levander, “‘Following the Condition of the Mother’: Subversions of Domesticity in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” in *Southern Mothers: Fact and Fictions in Southern Women’s Writing*, ed. Nagueyalti Warren and Sally Wolff (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 28–38; Krista Walter, “Surviving in the Garret: Harriet Jacobs and the Critique of Sentiment,” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1994): 189–210.

12 See, for example Michelle Burnham, “Loopholes of Resistance: Harriet Jacobs’ Slave Narrative and the Critique of Agency in Foucault,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 49, no. 2 (1993): 53–73.

13 Robyn R. Warhol, “‘Reader, Can You Imagine? No, You Cannot’: The Narratee as Other in Harriet Jacobs’s Text,” *Narrative* 3, no. 1 (January 1995): 79.

ond article, therefore, Warhol proposes to use the “binary model” of a gendered distinction between male distancing and female engaging narrators not to “fix” it as a universal or absolute but quite the opposite—to show how a text like Jacobs’s *Incidents* deployed, evaded, and improvised on it. Jacobs, she goes on to show, uses *both* kinds of narrator in her text. Sometimes her narrator is engaging and seeks to make common cause with readers, but at other times the narrator states unequivocally that her readers will never really understand her, such as when she writes, “Reader, can you imagine? No, you cannot.” Warhol puts the case more precisely by referring to the relation between Jacobs’s *narrator* and her book’s *narratee* (implied reader): “Jacobs’s narrator draws a line which the narratee may not cross in identifying with the narrator/protagonist” (64). This strategy “marks Jacobs as a precursor to the twentieth-century politics of difference” (67).<sup>14</sup>

Jacobs does indeed use this strategy all through her book. Take the chapter titled “Perilous Passage in the Life of a Slave Girl,” in which she tells the most controversial part of her story: her decision to enter into an affair with a white man (whom she names “Sands”) in order to have a protective buffer between herself and her master (Dr. Flint), whose sexual aggressions she has had to repel for years. She begins this chapter with a second-person address in which we hear what Warhol calls the “engaging” narrator. Jacobs appeals directly to her readers’ sympathies as women, emphasizing her intimacy with them (“I have promised to tell you the truth”) and the feelings (“sorrow and shame”) she hopes they will respond to with sympathy: “And now, reader, I come to a period of my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may” (53–54).

But soon after, Jacobs switches to a more “distancing” narrator who emphasizes the difference between herself and her readers: “But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor slave girl too severely. . . . I wanted to keep myself pure and preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me” (54). Later the narrator emphasizes even more emphatically the distance between herself and her readers: “Pity me,

14 Along with the politics of difference, a second critical trend of the 1980s and 1990s is at work in Warhol’s article. In her attention to the narrator and narratee, we see an emerging skepticism (generated mainly by French theorists, including Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) toward the importance of a text’s author and toward the reality of the individual-as-subject. If the first phase of Jacobs criticism read second-person address in terms of identification/solidarity/sisterhood and the second in terms of identity/difference, this third critical disposition cast doubt on the very coherence of terms like *identity* and *the subject*. While continuing to read moments of second-person address as sensitive registers of the complexity of Jacob’s position as a writer and hence of the sophistication of the text itself, critics who shared this disposition were less sanguine than their predecessors about the possibilities of agency, resistance, solidarity, and identity—all of which seemed to rely on a notion of a freestanding “subject” that the scholarship of Foucault in particular had rendered dubious.

and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another" (55).

Although Jacobs moves back and forth between these two kinds of narrator to lessen the risk she takes in being frank about sexuality, her strategy has another, secondary effect: the interplay between "engaging" and "distancing" narrators embeds a distinctive kind of theory, or theorizing, in her narrative. Recall Warhol's description of the typical male narrator in Victorian fiction. The distance he keeps between himself and his readers, she tells us, "opens up a metacritical space in the textual transaction: the distancing narrator—who emphasizes the fictiveness, the textuality, of a text by drawing the reader's attention to the way the novel is constructed—keeps literature at an aestheticized distance from the world of active politics." That distancing narrator sounds a lot like a conventional theorist: he creates a distance between himself and life (or his story), and he occupies a "metacritical" space from which he can observe and comment in ways that someone submersed in life (or his story) cannot.

When Jacobs's narrator is in her distancing mode, then, we can think of her as the implied theorist of *Incidents*. By pushing back against and resisting the very flow of sympathetic identification she has created while being "engaging," she reminds her readers that complete identification with her and her story is not possible. She thus subtly calls her readers' attention to "the textuality of the text"—to the fact that they are reading a text that has been written, not actually living the life of the character and narrator who stands at its center. Like the male distancing narrator, then, Jacob's narrator "opens up a metacritical space" insofar as she seems to stand outside and apart from the story of herself that she is telling; she writes from a space in which she can comment on the story and control the reader's relation to it instead of submerging herself in the story so that the reader simply identifies with her as its main character.

However, Jacobs's distancing narrator is crucially different from the classic male type: she does *not* create "an aestheticized distance from the politicized world." In fact, the opposite is true: her distancing narrator is *more* politicized than her engaging one, since she keeps bluntly reminding her readers of their privileged social position and of the ways their standpoint limits their ability to take in and understand the lives of those who occupy a different one. This implied theorist is therefore what we could call an *immanent* theorist, writing not from a relatively free, leisured, and objective perspective outside her story but from within the conditions of embodied, raced, and gendered struggle that she narrates.

### 3.

For this very reason, we should not be surprised that Jacobs gives this metacritical space of theorizing a material, specific location: it is the garret above her grandmother's attic, where for seven long years she hides from Dr. Flint. There, she



tells us, “the continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave” (114). The ambivalence Jacobs voices in this passage has been noted by many readers. On the one hand, she feels that this small, dark, cramped space, fiercely cold in winter and stiflingly hot in summer, is a severe intensification of her condition of enslavement: slavery confined her to a certain unfree life, but at least it left her free to move around. In this space she cannot even stand up. Indeed some critics have argued that this “loophole of retreat” is one of a series of enclosed spaces that literally intensify and figuratively represent her condition of enslavement.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, Jacobs also says that she preferred the garret, both because it kept her beyond reach of her master’s domination *and* because it provided her the opportunity to survey and speculate—to theorize—about her life: “Uncomfortable as my situation was, I had glimpses of things out of doors, which made me thankful for my wretched hiding-place” (121–22).

For Jacobs, then, the garret is a place where theory as *thea*, or privileged and insightful watching, can occur: “I was thankful when there came a day sufficiently mild for me to wrap myself up and sit at the loophole to watch the passersby. Southerners have the habit of stopping and talking in the streets, and I hear many conversations not intended to meet my ear” (116–17). The garret is the site not merely of Jacobs’s ocular but of her intellectual speculation as she meditates upon the meaning of what she calls “the gloomy past and the uncertain future” (116). She tells us that she often asked the classic questions of theodicy: what kind of God would permit such unjust human suffering as she and other enslaved persons have experienced? “Dark thoughts passed through my mind as I lay there day after day. I tried to be thankful for my little cell, dismal as it was, and even to love it, as part of the price I had to pay for the redemption of my children. Sometimes I thought God was a compassionate Father, who would forgive my sins for the sake of my suffering” (123).

By this point, some readers of *Incidents* will subliminally anticipate the explicit or implied *but* or *however* that’s in the offing. For denial of the future is written into the very syntax of this book; whether expressed or merely implied, *but* is the pivot on which time’s futurity turns back on itself and becomes instead the past repeated. Here too Jacobs makes such a reversal: “At other times, it seemed to me that there was no justice or divine mercy in the divine government. I asked why

15 As Valerie Smith writes: “Repeatedly she escapes overwhelming persecution only by choosing her own space of confinement: the stigma of unwed motherhood over sexual submission to her master; concealment in one friend’s home, another’s closet; and her grandmother’s garret over her own and her children’s enslavement on a plantation; Jim Crowism and the threat of the Fugitive Slave Law in the North over institutionalized slavery at home. Yet each moment of apparent enclosure actually empowers Jacobs to redirect her own and her children’s destiny.” *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, 29–30.

the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted and wronged from youth upward. These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter" (123).

In the garret Jacobs also theorizes about the role ideology plays in maintaining the slavery system. Surmising that "Northern travellers" who witnessed her aunt Nancy's funeral might have interpreted it as proof of the benevolence of the South's patriarchal institution, she writes: "We could have told them a different story. We could have given them a chapter of wrongs and sufferings that would have touched their hearts, if they had any hearts to feel for the colored people. . . . All this, and much more, I thought of, as I sat at my loophole, waiting for the family to return from the grave; sometimes weeping, sometimes, falling asleep, dreaming strange dreams of the dead and the living" (147). These words suggest that Jacob's theorizing is not merely idle speculation; she may already be planning to tell her own version of a "different story." More certainly, she is in the garret when she devises and executes a plan to fool Dr. Flint by having friends send letters written in her hand from the North, thereby tricking him into assuming that she had escaped his grasp.

Finally, explicitly thematizing her abstention from futurity, Jacobs emphasizes that her years in the garret felt like an imprisonment in time, not just in space. Although the seasons continued to wheel round, time did not move forward. She titles one chapter "Still in Prison," and she tells us: "Countless were the nights that I sat late at the little loophole scarcely large enough to give me a glimpse of one twinkling star. . . . Sometimes it appeared to me as if ages had rolled away since I entered upon that gloomy, monotonous existence" (148).

#### 4.

A sense of time without a future thus marks many of the "incidents" Jacobs recounts as well as her long imprisonment in the loophole of retreat. We shall now see that it also enters into and shapes Jacobs's use of second-person address—the mode through which she theorizes—and thereby comes to characterize both her theory and her story.

To see how this is so, we must first remind ourselves that the "I" who addresses the reader in this book is neither the author Harriet Jacobs nor the enslaved girl she used to be, whom she names Linda Brent; the "I" is the *narrator* whom Jacobs-as-author has fashioned, the *created* voice through which the narrative is recounted. Likewise, the person ("*O reader*") addressed by this voice is not the actual reader of the text but a textual stand-in for the reader; it is the "implied reader" of the text, with whom the actual reader is invited to identify. The implied reader remains unchanged, frozen (like the narrator) in the timeless time of a purely textual existence. Actual readers, however, change. The first generation of Jacobs's readers came to the text with very different assumptions and attitudes than the

second generation. Readers today come to the text very differently still, and future readers will approach it with assumptions and expectations we cannot even imagine. Yet all readers who open the book and read “O reader” will take that “reader” to be themselves.

When readers bring their assumptions and expectations to the text, they bring with them their historical context, the world they live in, their own “now.” Borrowing a term from anthropologist David Scott, I am going to call each generation of readers’ *now* their “problem-space.” This is their sense of the conditions and challenges that mark their particular moment in history.<sup>16</sup> Jacobs’s first readers did not know that slavery would be abolished just a few years after the book was published; therefore their problem-space certainly included slavery. Our problem-space is very different. We read the book knowing that US chattel slavery officially disappeared long ago, and we are aware that a black American has served two terms as the president of the United States. But we are also aware, as Jacobs’s first readers could not have been, that white racism has persisted nonetheless and that a movement called Black Lives Matter has arisen in response to persistent police brutality aimed at black men and women. These are aspects of *our* now; these are important features of our “problem-space.” At any moment of second-person address, then, when Jacobs’s at once engaging and distancing narrator says “And now, reader,” to the implied reader, we actual readers imaginatively step into the “metacritical space” where that narrator sits and speaks, and we bring with us our now. The past and future meet in the “now” of Jacobs’s second-person address.

This would have been true even of Jacobs’s first readers. They too would have understood themselves to be occupying a future that had come into being *after* the lines they were reading had been written; familiar with the conventions of reading, none would have supposed that they were actually hearing the narrator’s words as the implied reader does, in the frozen past of the book’s moment of composition. They took for granted the lapse of a thin sliver of time between that moment and the moment of their own reading of the text. (In that sliver of time the book was completed, edited, and published, and made its way into their hands.) As they read *Incidents*, then, they imaginatively traversed that temporal gap to identify with the implied reader and to stand in the narrator’s temporal space with her—that is, in the past. But one could just as accurately say that Jacobs’s narrator, equally aware of this temporal gap, projects her voice across it to meet her readers in what is to them the present but to her is an indefinite series of unknown futures.<sup>17</sup> In sum, the “now” of Jacobs’s second-person address is

16 Which he defines as “more than a cognitively intelligible arrangement of concepts, ideas, images, meanings, and so on. . . . It is a context of argument and, therefore, an intervention. A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which an horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political) hangs.” David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

17 None of this is specific to Jacobs; I am just distinguishing between the narratological insights Warhol brings to the narrative’s workings for contemporaneous readers and its workings for us.

to be found neither in the past alone nor in the future alone, but where the two meet and converge in the text's eternal present. This "now" is not a moment in a sequence of moments. It does not stand in either "linear time" or in "circular time." It is what we might call a time out of time.

We should be careful to note, however, that just because this temporal space stands outside time, it does not remain always the same. It is different for every reader who steps into it, for each brings his or her own now, or problem-space, which strongly shapes how they read the text and what they get out of it. Yet even though it changes in this way, this *now* also remains stubbornly tethered to the narrator's *now*, which we understand it to be issuing from a specific past, the temporal space that begins after Jacobs's emancipation and before the book's publication (i.e., sometime between 1857 and 1861): this is when Jacobs herself would have been writing her book and creating the narrator whose second-person addresses, or interventions, we are now reading.<sup>18</sup> Thus the *now* into which every generation of readers steps in order to identify (partially) with the implied reader and associate with the narrator is both changing and fixed, indefinite and definite, ahistorical and historical, "meta" and grounded.<sup>19</sup> These dynamics, unnoticed by most readers, are at work in every fiction that employs second-person address to the reader as "you."

Jacobs's *Incidents*, however, goes one step further. Its pulling of the actual reader's *now* back into the *now* of the book's narration is doubled and intensified by the pulling of the narrator's *now* back into the "loophole of retreat" that she had left some three years earlier. Toward the end of her account of her seven years in the garret, Jacobs's narrator confesses that "even *now*," as she writes her book, she is still deeply affected by the trauma of her seven-year incarceration in the "dismal hole" (emphasis added). She writes: "I hardly expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years. But it is a fact; and to me a sad one, even now; for my body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment, to say nothing of my soul" (148). Here the overtaking

18 Jacobs's earliest published account of her enslavement appeared in the *New York Tribune*, June 21, 1853. *Incidents* was published in January, 1861.

19 Literary historians Thomas Allen and Lloyd Pratt have already established that in the antebellum period, not everyone imagined time to be uniform and linear, moving the nation progressively toward its manifest destiny. African American life narratives in particular, according to Pratt, imagine alternative conceptions of futurity. Although such open-ended futurities certainly animate the particular texts Pratt discusses, they do not figure importantly in *Incidents*, which presents an exception to the pattern he perceives. For an account of the child as figure of natality in the antebellum US, see Marissa Carrere, "'As Child in Time': U.S. Literary Imaginings of Childhood, Temporality, and Democracy" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2015). See also Mary Niall Mitchell's history of the ways "the black child" of the 1850s and 1860s "represented the possibility of a future dramatically different from the past, a future in which black Americans might have access to the same privileges as whites: landownership, equality, autonomy." *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 5.

of the future by the past becomes explicit. The *now* of Jacobs's second-person address is revealed to be so affected by this past that it is inseparable from it. Jacobs may be sitting in a room somewhere in Mrs. Willis's house composing *Incidents*, but her narrator tells us that she still *feels* the effects of that long confinement on her body and her soul. Recall also Jacobs's writing: "These things took the shape of mystery, *which is to this day* not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter" (emphases added). Jacobs's "this day" is the present-tense *now* of her narration; while composing her text, she feels that the reason for her former enslavement remains as much a "mystery" as ever. Once again a seeming future is folded back into an inescapable past.

The effects of this double pull on readers may be subliminal, but they are profound. Whenever we read "reader" or "you" and respond to her narrator addressing us, we are called back into the now of her book's being narrated. But that time is haunted by Jacobs's seven years in her loophole of retreat, which was her space of theorizing. Therefore as readers we too are called to sit *with* her in her cramped, radically unfree space of theorizing and to experience theorizing as she did.

Thus Jacobs's *Incidents* offers us a theory about time and the relation of politics to time. Never stated but often implied, this theory asserts first that time is not linear in the sense of one moment succeeding another, for in her account the past is never left behind but rises to meet her (and us) at every moment of the purported "future." It suggests, second, that such a view of time does not render political planning and political action impossible, but on the contrary promotes these. For as we have seen, while she was in the garret, Jacobs made it seem that she had moved forward into a free state and that she was writing to her master Dr. Flint from that location, when in fact she was still as much a captive as ever. Indeed she took advantage of Flint's assumption that because the letters appeared to come from the Free States, she was actually there. But as Jacobs suggests, time does not fall into a "before" and an "after"—in this case a time of bondage followed by a time of freedom—for the past is never left behind. Had Flint himself shared her skepticism toward linear, forward-moving time, he might have thought to look for Jacobs where she was—not elsewhere but where she had always been.

This theory of time as having no future that can be counted upon may be the most radical difference in "the different story" Jacobs writes in order to contest and displace the image of the slavery system that the South has foisted upon the citizens of the Free States. The obvious message of Jacobs's story is, of course, that the condition of enslavement is much worse than anything the people of the North know or can even imagine. But accompanying this message is a theory of political time, one that suggests that there is no future free of the past. To be sure, Jacobs does plan for her children's future freedom, and she secures it. Neither her thinking nor her actions forgo the future and its possibilities absolutely. But the great many instances in which *Incidents* reveals futurity to be illusory work very strongly to qualify and ultimately negate any *presumption* of futurity.

## 5.

As I have suggested already, by pointing to another way of theorizing—from necessity, not from freedom; from historical situatedness, not from an ethereal space outside of history—Jacobs stands in a long tradition of African American thinkers. To distinguish this tradition from mainstream Western philosophy, Leonard Harris called it “a philosophy born of struggle.” George Yancy has described it as theorizing that occurs “within the concrete muck and mire of *raced* embodied existence.” And speaking from this tradition while also describing it, Patricia Hill Collins has insisted that in truth *all* theory is historical, embodied, situated: “It is impossible to separate the structure and thematic content of thought from the historical and material conditions shaping the lives of its producers.” Such an epistemology also underlies Charles Mills’s critique of “racial liberalism.”<sup>20</sup>

Theorizing within and from her loophole of retreat, Jacobs stands in this black critical tradition. At the same time, by thinking and writing through her experience as a black *woman*—that is, through the intersection of her racial and gender identities—Jacobs also takes her place as a founder of a long tradition of black feminist thought, one that includes Maria B. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Pauline Hopkins, Angela Davis, and Claudia Rankine among many others. Indeed, if (as I believe) her doubtfulness about the future arose from the difficult experience of being an enslaved black woman, then her distinctive challenge to conventional theory should be read as a black feminist challenge. This challenge is a radical questioning of one of political theory’s deepest assumptions: its confident faith in futurity, including the belief (or hope) that the political theory of today is an advance upon political theory done in the past. In the lexicon of political theory, such key words as *nativity*, *innovation*, *renewal*, *transformation*, and *revolution* are all put under suspicion, or at least bracketed, by Jacobs’s thought.<sup>21</sup> Her book warns us to suspect that any political theory that simply takes for granted its own futurity and the existence of the future is, however radical or resistant in its own eyes, what historian John Ernst calls a “culturally authorized way of knowing.”<sup>22</sup> We might applaud the chiasmic claim of

20 Leonard Harris, ed., *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall, 1983). Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (October–December 1986): S16; George Yancy, “African-American Philosophy: Through the Lens of Socio-existential Struggle,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37, no. 5 (June 2011): 552. Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

21 See, however, Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). Jacobs’s ambivalence about her reproductive futurity resonates with Edelman’s critique of such futurity as “the logic within which the political must be thought” (2).

22 John Ernst, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 201.

Douglass's famous line "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" because we want to believe that temporality can be reversed and crimes rectified without any residue.<sup>23</sup> Jacobs demurs: "There are wrongs which even the grave does not bury."

What might have caused Jacobs to hold such a view of time? One source, surely, was her own fraught, gender-specific relation to the futurity of her reproductive body. As a black woman, Jacobs was compelled by her enslavement to consider that both forced and voluntary sexual relations would likely result in her birthing children into a condition of enslavement. In either case, the reproductive futurity of her body would be put to use, against her will, for the reproduction of the slavery system itself. Thus the futurity or "natality" (to use Hannah Arendt's term) that is incarnated in a woman's fertility as well as in the children she bears was absolutely negated by Jacobs's enslavement. It is unsurprising that a woman in these conditions would adopt a highly skeptical view of time's futural possibilities and might even conclude that confidence in futurity itself is a delusion.

Such a view would only have been deepened and affirmed by the effects of traumatic experience. There is much to say on this topic, but here I can merely observe that, as Jenny Edkins writes, "trauma and traumatic memory alter the linearity of historical, narrativized time, time which has beginnings and ends." This is because "trauma is not experienced at the time" it occurs; "it is belated. It returns in the form of dreams or flashbacks."<sup>24</sup> This account of trauma's effects surely helps us understand why *Incidents* is marked by so many disruptions of linear time, occasions when the future turns out to be the past, or when the future does not arrive at all. It also helps us understand why *Incidents* is narrated in a way that suggests that even as Jacobs's narrator composes the book and addresses her implied reader, she feels that she has never completely left the past she writes about: she is traumatized by it. Such trauma also helps explain why the *now* that she bids her readers to step into is always implicitly a "flashback" to her past enslavement and to the foul, dark confines of the loophole of retreat.

With the consequences of trauma in mind, we might be tempted to call Jacobs's *Incidents* a "tragedy," but "tragedy" does not accurately describe *Incidents*. Tragedy is a narrative form with an arc of development and an ending that brings unambiguous closure. This isn't true of Jacobs's book, the very title of which seeks to preserve individual splinters of time in isolation, rather than fusing them into a narrative.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, tragedy conventionally requires a fatal flaw and a

23 Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 60.

24 Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40. See also Joy DeGruy Leary, *Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukee, OR: Uptone, 2005). Leary points out that according to the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, one of the effects of trauma is a "sense of foreshortened future," (119).

25 We should be careful not to ascribe too much importance to the title, since it might not have been Jacobs's choice but her editor Lydia Maria Child's, as Albert H. Tricomi argues in "Harriet Jacobs's Autobiography and the Voice of Lydia Maria Child," *ESQ: A Journal of the American*

comeuppance or reckoning that results from it; *Incidents* exhibits neither of these qualities.

We might also be tempted to view Jacobs's theory as a forerunner of what recently has been called "Afro-pessimism," but in my view that too would be a mistake. Afro-pessimism is an intellectual disposition that arises from a totalizing explanation (persisting antiblack racism) for why things are as they are and why they will never meaningfully change for the black community. According to this view, slavery may have been formally abolished, but the slave relation has been ontologized as "the essential principle of black existence."<sup>26</sup> Jacobs refrains from such closure. Her theory's relative openness is enabled by its sense that "a different story" requires a different temporality, and with it a radically different plot. It does not presume the hopelessness of the future, it simply refrains from presuming that the future will exist. This is a fine distinction, to be sure. But it is an important one.

As we grapple with what Jacobs's abstention from futurity might mean for political theory today, we should bear in mind that *any* theory issuing from conditions of enslavement will likely appear unrecognizable to more conventional modes. Perhaps the best way to take it up is simply to listen to its strange music and to let its impenetrable mysteriousness subtly reconfigure more familiar ways of thinking. Jacobs herself hints as much in these sentences:

And now I will tell you something that happened to me; though you will, perhaps, think it illustrates the superstition of slaves. . . . A band of serenaders were under the window, playing "home, sweet home." I listened till the sounds did not seem like music, but like the moaning of children. It seemed as if my heart would burst. I rose from my sitting posture and knelt. A streak of moonlight was on the floor before me, and in the midst of it appeared the forms of my two children. They vanished; but I had seen them distinctly. Some will call it a dream, others a vision. I know not how to account for it, but it made a strong impression on my mind, and I felt certain that something had happened to my little ones. (107–8)

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*Renaissance* 53, no. 3 (2007): 216–52. Frances Smith Foster states that the book's original title was "Linda, or Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl." "Resisting Incidents," in *Harriet Jacobs and "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl": New Critical Essays*, ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57–75.

26 This is from the clearest definition of Afro-pessimism that I have read: "Afro-pessimism is rather an informal tendency that could be designated as a constellation of theorists, ideas and artistic works ruminating upon the structural condition of black existence as indelibly marked by the residual echoes of the slave relation. For the Afro-pessimists, the advent of emancipation did not signal any substantial break with the content of slavery. Instead the passage from slavery to freedom marked the transition from one mode of racialised domination to another. Following the abolition of slavery, the formal determinations of slavery were subsumed under the racial category of blackness (synonymous with the construction of 'race'), naturalising and thereby ontologising the slave relation as the essential principle of black existence." R.L., "Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death" *Mute* 5 (June 2013), unpaginated. <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wanderings-slave-black-life-and-social-death>.



In his perceptive reading of this passage, John Ernst calls attention to its “unquestioning acceptance of mystifying experience.” He writes, “We miss an important dimension of [Incidents] when we pass by this lightly or try to account for it in ways that [Jacobs] herself cannot; for the motive power of a new mode of visioning lies in the . . . unquestioning acceptance of mystifying experience. The point is not to understand it but rather to acknowledge that which lies beyond understanding, and thereby to identify the limitations of culturally authorized ways of knowing.”<sup>27</sup> Vividly and poignantly, then, Jacobs turns traditional theory inside out. That theory’s illusory space of imagined freedom for reflection is here revealed to be its very opposite—a “dark and loathsome hole.” That theory’s obsession with getting things right is here admonished to “acknowledge that which lies beyond understanding.” Jacobs’s political theory is thus an instance of what Saidiya Hartman calls “the unthought”: the thinking of those who, deemed officially to be nonpersons or “things,” are judged to be incapable of thought, and whose thought is therefore not legible to “culturally authorized ways of knowing.”<sup>28</sup> Yet this “unthought” sees the world of the slavery system “as it exists” (to borrow the words of David Walker, another thinker discussed in this volume). It also reveals the “limitations” of conventional thought that conventional thought is perforce blind to.

## 6.

When I say that Jacobs’s political theory without a future “challenges” political theory and its reliance on futurity, I do not mean to imply that it negates or overturns such theory. Her futureless theorizing is not “better” than, or an “advance” upon, theorizing that does presume a future of some kind. (Such a view of it would obviously be self-contradictory.) Rather, it serves to remind conventional political theory that it does not tell the whole story, that it is an incomplete project, and that it should strive to hear and respond to political theorizing that emerges from outside the mainstream, especially from conditions of manifest unfreedom.

To take just one example: a number of political theorists and legal scholars have argued that Americans should not regard past understandings of the Constitution as exerting an authoritative influence over the ways we construe it today. Instead we should read it as a “living” document whose meaning changes constantly over time. Likewise with the American Revolution: we should see it not as inaugurating a completed democracy that we can now enjoy, but rather as modeling a revolutionary activity that we must continually reenact. These theorists

27 Ernst, *Liberation Historiography*, 201. For a different but complementary reading of this same scene, see Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

28 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62.

advocate “a different relationship to the revolutionary past,” one that enables “a renewed attentiveness to the possibilities of a more democratic future.” Citizens who embrace such an understanding of democracy would not look retrospectively to the past for self-authorization but instead look prospectively forward, adopting “an orientation enlivened by a sensitivity to the unanticipated and emergent.”<sup>29</sup>

This is a compelling argument, and I am persuaded by it. Yet the very idea of “prospective time” rests on confidence in futurity itself, which Jacobs’s political theory admonishes us to reconsider. To be clear: her theory does not deny or refute this assumption; it simply abstains from it, thereby calling it into question. It simply encourages all political theorists to refrain from assuming that the category of the future can be relied upon, and to explain *why* they believe it can be. (Often our unexamined assumptions are precisely the points we need most to test and verify.) Jacobs’s work might even challenge theorists to consider whether a practical theory of democracy really *needs* futurity—whether a prospective vision is the only or best antidote to an excessively retrospective one. What about the present—what Frederick Douglass called “the ever-present now”? What Martin Luther called a prospective orientation too often means delay, postponement, and indefinite deferral. For those who are suffering injustice, *now* is always the time to act. In response to this line of thought, one need not abandon one’s commitment to a future-oriented disposition for democracy; but one should feel some pressure to explain why one thinks that the future can be relied upon as a temporal category.

Today, moreover, such explanation would be especially fitting. Many political theorists share with David Scott a disappointment with what he calls the “the collapse of hitherto existing horizons of possible futures”—be they the possibilities set in motion by the civil rights movement, the utopian dreams of the 1960s, or the prospects of a liberated postcolonial world order. Yet as we strive to imagine new freedom dreams, we are also bitterly conscious of how often imagined futures have been deployed to forestall political action in the present. We know that the very forces that oppose and weaken democracy loudly celebrate democracy’s future potential: democracy’s failures today, according to this progressive teleology, will disappear in its fuller self-realization tomorrow. But that wonderful future has not yet arrived. One wonders if it ever will.<sup>30</sup>

Caught in this squeeze play, we need more than ever before to perceive “the limits of culturally authorized ways of knowing,” and we need to find resources in alternative ways of knowing that have been overlooked or dismissed entirely. Perhaps, then, we should ask ourselves: *Is the idea of the future really useful now?*

29 Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 249.

30 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 4. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002).

Instead of reconstructing or constructing more imagined futures, perhaps we should learn to theorize without assuming the existence of *any* future. And yet what is political thought without the idea of the future? Can we continue to imagine and to act politically without taking *for granted* the arrival of a future? These are the kinds of radical questions Jacobs's political theory puts before us.

## 7.

There may be a hint of an answer to them in an evocative metaphor she places early in her book. She tells us that when her brother Benjamin escaped to Baltimore, he was discovered by a neighbor of his master who happened to be visiting that city. Surprisingly, this gentleman did not turn Benjamin over to the authorities; instead he wished him well, and they amicably parted ways. Pondering the meaning of this incident, Jacobs writes: "That man was a miracle. He possessed a goodly number of slaves, and yet was not quite deaf to that mystic clock, whose ticking is rarely heard in the slaveholder's breast" (24).

A bit of research reveals that Jacobs found the image of a "mystic clock" in a poem called "The Life Clock," which was published in *The Golden Gift: A Token for All Seasons* in 1848. Since there is a contribution by Nathaniel P. Willis in this volume, we can reasonably surmise that Jacobs read the poem while living in the Willises' home, which is where she composed most of *Incidents*. The poem's first stanzas read:

There is a little mystic clock  
No human eye hath seen  
That beateth on and beateth on  
From morn until e'en.

And when the soul is wrapped in sleep  
And heareth not a sound,  
It ticks and ticks the livelong night  
And never runneth down.<sup>31</sup>

In her reflections on the slaveholder's kindness to Benjamin, Jacobs clearly uses the "mystic clock" as a metaphor (albeit a strange one) for his "heart" or "conscience": his conscience is always awake because it is always attuned to its intuitive knowledge of right and wrong. Yet in the poem itself, this metaphor seems to represent something quite different—the nature of time. It suggests that time just passes, that it goes on and on and on, that it "ticks and ticks the livelong

<sup>31</sup> N. P. Willis, "The Life Clock," in *The Golden Gift: A Token for All Seasons*, ed. J. M. Fletchek (Hartford, CT: Brockett, Fuller, 1848), 95.

night / and never runneth down.” This is time without a future, if by “future” we refer to time that is *going somewhere*, moving from a past through a present into a future that is significantly different, unspooling a narrative that has arc and purpose. And if the time in this poem does not move forward, it does not turn in circles either. The poem’s temporal references are all to diurnal time—morning, evening, and night—but it never completes its cycle back to morning. The poem instead leaves readers in an unending “livelong” night in which the clock goes on ticking forever. Neither linear nor circular, then, the time marked out by this clock is time that goes nowhere. It may be the dark reverse weave of what Douglass optimistically celebrated as “the ever-present now,” but it is nonetheless the time that, for Jacobs, most urgently prompts the mind to political theory and the conscience to political action.

How can this be? Through what hidden associative logic did Jacobs conflate the mystic clock as awakened conscience with the mystic clock as futureless time? Perhaps we see an answer—or an analogue—in Cornel West’s distinction between “optimism” and “hope”:

Hope and optimism are different. Optimism tends to be based on the notion that there’s enough evidence out there to believe things are gonna be better, much more rational, deeply secular, whereas hope looks at the evidence and says, “It doesn’t look good at all. Doesn’t look good at all. Gonna go beyond the evidence to create new possibilities based on visions that become contagious to allow people to engage in heroic actions always against the odds, no guarantee whatsoever.” That’s hope. I’m a prisoner of hope, though. Gonna die a prisoner of hope.<sup>32</sup>

West’s hope is paradoxical, almost self-contradictory—how can hope feel like a life sentence in prison? Yet by insisting on this very possibility, West challenges us just as Jacobs does. Perhaps political theory without a future is not hopeless, but rather hope without optimism. Perhaps by repeatedly drawing her future readers back into the *now* of her loophole of retreat, where they peer with her through a tiny hole at the world outside and share her grave doubts about the very existence of the future, Jacobs encourages us to see ourselves this way: not as optimists, nor as pessimists, but as prisoners of hope who cannot be sure of the future. *Any* future. Yet who must act. Now.<sup>33</sup>

32 Quoted by Anna Deveare Smith, *Letters to a Young Artist: Straight-up Advice on Making a Life in the Arts* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 160.

33 I am grateful to a number of readers, including the editors of this volume, for their helpful responses to earlier drafts of this essay. I would like to thank especially Jasmine K. Syedullah, who kindly deepened my understanding of Jacobs as a black feminist thinker.

## 5: Frederick Douglass

### Nonsovereign Freedom and the Plurality of Political Resistance

Sharon R. Krause

In the life and work of Frederick Douglass, freedom was always the guiding light. As he tells it, the longing for freedom arose with his first awakening of self-consciousness, when as a young boy he became aware, simultaneously, of himself and his condition as a slave. Thereafter freedom was his polestar, orienting his action for the rest of his life, both in bondage and, after his escape, through his long career as an activist and reformer. If freedom was his guiding light, resistance to domination and oppression was his animating spring. At sixteen he famously rose in physical resistance to his slave master, risking his life to defend his “essential dignity.”<sup>1</sup> Later he used the power of his pen and his talent as an orator to oppose the American system of slavery as a whole. After slavery fell, he used them to contest the violent racial prejudice that continued to pervade American society. He also sought to enliven the spirit of resistance in others because he was convinced that for African Americans there could be no freedom without resistance, including resistance to the internalized effects of slavery and prejudice.

This emphasis on personal resistance as the animating spring of freedom was part of a broader effort by Douglass to foster individual agency among people whose life conditions were extraordinarily disabling of agency. It goes together with his exhortation to “self-reliance”<sup>2</sup> and the elevation of the black race.<sup>3</sup> And it has led to widespread misconceptions about Douglass and his understanding of freedom. Specifically, it has caused conservative commentators to claim him as a model of the highly individualist, bootstrapper approach they favor as a remedy to the problem of racial inequality.<sup>4</sup> It has also led those on the radical end to criticize Douglass for that very individualism, and for being inattentive to the

1 Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1893), in *Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 591.

2 Frederick Douglass, letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, March 8, 1853, in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 216.

3 1865, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 581.

4 See, for example, Dinesh D’Souza, *The End of Racism* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 113, 556; Benjamin Quarles, “Frederick Douglass, Bridge-Builder in Human Relations,” *Negro History Bulletin* 29, no. 5 (February 1966): 100; both cited in Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland, introduction to *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, ed. Lawson and Kirkland (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 10.

dynamics of structural injustice.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the emphasis on personal resistance has generated an apparent tension with ideas that Douglass defended in the post-Reconstruction period involving the importance of state-based economic support for freed people. Some commentators criticize him for what they see as the contradiction of defending both individual independence and social provision.<sup>6</sup> None of these interpretations is without support. Yet the truth about Douglass is more complex and far richer than his critics have seen.

Part of the reason for the confusion is that Douglass's understanding of freedom was never explicated in a systematic way. His speeches and other writings give us a fascinating but ostensibly disparate collection of insights about freedom. One way to fit them together is by reading Douglass through the lens of a theory of nonsovereign freedom that has roots in Hannah Arendt. On the nonsovereign view, human agency has two parts: individual initiative and social uptake. Individual initiative matters a great deal to agency—and ultimately to freedom—but its efficacy is always contingent both on material conditions and on social reception, on how other people understand and respond to the initiatives that the individual begins. If others interpret and respond to one's initiatives in ways that systematically misrepresent them and undercut their efficacy, one's agency will be deeply troubled, and with it one's freedom. This disabling dynamic is exactly what Douglass observed among African Americans during and after slavery. The achievement of freedom will therefore require individual initiative together with the social conditions that facilitate its uptake and foster its efficacy, including material resources and equal recognition. This logic explains why Douglass championed both individual initiative and social provision. It also illuminates the plurality of forms that political resistance took in his own work and life over the long term. Political resistance properly conceived combines the cultivation of individual initiative with the reconstruction of society needed to ensure the social uptake of that initiative, and this hybrid goal requires a multidimensional

<sup>5</sup> See Waldo E. Martin Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 282; Charles Mills, "Whose Fourth of July? Frederick Douglass and 'Original Intent,'" in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, 134; and Angela Y. Davis, "From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System," in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, 359. Cornel West accuses Douglass of having become "part of the establishment" after the end of slavery. See West, *Black Prophetic Fire* (Boston: Beacon, 2014), 15.

<sup>6</sup> See David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 195; and Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 67, 256–57. Jack Turner argues against Blight and Martin that "there is a principle uniting Douglass's self-reliant individualism and his insistence . . . that the federal government was obligated to provide material assistance to freed people: liberal democratic governments must . . . ensure that the material rudiments of self-help are universally available." Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 49. See also Jack Turner, "Douglass and Political Judgment: The Post-Reconstruction Years," in *A Political Companion to Frederick Douglass*, ed. Neil Roberts (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 204. The present analysis shares this conviction and seeks to uncover the deeper assumptions about human agency that underlie the unifying principle Turner identifies.

approach. A nonsovereign view of freedom thus gives us reason to be pluralists about political resistance and to value its diverse trajectories.

Part 1 of this chapter briefly summarizes the most influential aspects of Douglass's life and work, including his core principles and most important public achievements, and identifies the strands that have drawn the most potent criticism. Part 2 explores the nonsovereign character of freedom in Douglass, engaging Arendt to explain the meaning of nonsovereignty and showing how this idea implicitly permeates and helps to unify Douglass's rich collection of insights about freedom. If resistance is to be an effective spring of freedom, the social field of meaning and action that receives individual initiatives will need to be radically reconstituted. Political resistance must include attention to both individual initiative and social uptake. Part 3 then explores the plural forms that resistance takes in Douglass, including physical (even violent) rebellion, deliberately engaged social criticism, and the use of government power for reformist ends.

### 1. Life and Work

Frederick Douglass was born a slave in Maryland in 1818. He barely knew his mother and had no certain knowledge of his father, although his father was said to have been his master.<sup>7</sup> His early childhood was spent in the care of his maternal grandparents, the slaves Betsy and Isaac Baily, on the plantation of Edward Lloyd. Bright, curious, and ambitious by nature, he learned to read and write despite the strictures against slave literacy. At age sixteen he had a transformative encounter with an abusive master by the name of Covey. Pushed to the breaking point by Covey's brutal violence, Douglass fought back and won, successfully putting an end to the physical abuse. Although he remained bound in subjection to Covey's authority, Covey never beat him again. Douglass later described the encounter as "the turning point in my life as a slave," and he set his sights on escape. Four years later, after one failed attempt, he successfully made it to the free state of New York and embarked on a new life.<sup>8</sup> He settled with his wife in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and later in Rochester, New York. In 1841, having become active in the black antislavery community, he was recruited to tell the story of his bondage and escape at a function of white abolitionists in Nantucket organized by followers of William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass turned out to have a powerful presence at the podium, and thereafter he was in high demand as a speaker for abolitionist events. His story was published in 1845 as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. By 1850 it had sold thirty thousand copies, and Douglass was a famous man.

7 William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 8, 13.

8 Until Douglass's freedom was purchased for him by English supporters shortly before his return to the US from an extended trip abroad in 1847, he remained a fugitive slave. His life in the "free" Northern states was marked by radical uncertainty and the constant threat of abduction by slave catchers, who made a living preying upon the ostensibly free black population.

Over the course of the next forty-five years, until his death in 1895, Douglass became a well-known and highly regarded author, lecturer, newspaper editor, Republican Party activist, and political functionary. He was the most influential black man of his generation, perhaps of the nineteenth century, and he devoted his life to the advance of freedom—above all for African Americans but also for women, for the poor, and for black people throughout the African diaspora. His major works include three different versions of his personal story published over the course of his life, beginning with *Narrative* in 1845 and continuing with *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855 and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in 1881.<sup>9</sup> He also delivered countless speeches over fifty years and published innumerable pieces in the newspapers he edited between 1847 and 1874.

His works reflect an abiding belief in the truth and efficacy of natural law, which he believed establishes the moral equality of all persons and the universal rights to freedom and fairness. As other scholars have noted, he never wavered in these fundamental beliefs. He also consistently held that governments and laws ought to be in harmony with natural law, and that any departures from natural law compromised their legitimacy. His understanding of the legitimacy of American government underwent substantial change over time, however. Early on he stood by the Garrisonian view that the US Constitution was essentially a slaver's document that sanctioned outright violations of natural law and therefore lacked legitimacy. After 1850 he came to a different opinion. As a result of extensive deliberative engagement with a diverse range of interlocutors, Douglass began to see the Constitution, together with the Declaration of Independence, as containing principles that do indeed express moral equality and a universal right to freedom, and hence as compatible with natural law.<sup>10</sup> He held that the principles contained in America's founding documents imposed obligations on both the state and citizens to end slavery and establish full equality, freedom, and fairness for all members of the polity. He also came to believe in the strategic value of appeals to American identity and patriotic sentiment, and in the power of the American government as a potential protector of freedom for black people.

Douglass generally resisted the movements for black expatriation that became popular during and after Reconstruction among whites and some African Americans.<sup>11</sup> He did himself live abroad for a time in the 1840s, in large part to avoid being captured and returned to bondage once his fame had publicized his fugitive status and his whereabouts. And he had no special love for the United States,

<sup>9</sup> A revised edition of the third autobiography was published in 1893 to cover the years subsequent to 1881.

<sup>10</sup> Bromell points out that Douglass's work as a newspaper editor brought him into conversation with opposing viewpoints and moved him to rethink many subjects. Nick Bromell, "A 'Voice from the Enslaved': The Origins of Frederick Douglass's Political Philosophy of Democracy," *American Literary History* 23, no. 4: 707.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard R. Boxill, "Douglass against the Emigrationists," in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, 21–49.



especially prior to the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War. "If ever I had any patriotism," he wrote to William Lloyd Garrison in 1846, "it was whipt out of me long since by the lash of the American soul-drivers."<sup>12</sup> Still, as Douglass saw it, for black people born and raised in the United States, no place was *more* a home than America. Nor was any country better equipped, in terms of its constitutive principles and material resources, to make the achievement of freedom possible for blacks. The countries of Africa and Latin America to which the proponents of black colonization most often pointed were poor and undeveloped, and they often lacked republican principles and political institutions. Difficult as it would surely be to effect the necessary reforms in the US, African Americans stood a better chance of gaining freedom by working for change at home than by leaving for far-flung places with neither the principles nor the resources that were available to them on their native soil.

To bring about the needed reform, Douglass pursued two goals simultaneously: the cultivation of black initiative and the broad reconstruction of American society. Cultivating black initiative against the backdrop of two hundred years of slavery involved stoking flames of hope, desire, and pride that had been violently suppressed for generations. Douglass believed that these flames are natural to human nature and can be regenerated, however battered they might be. His many appeals to self-reliance and independence, which we shall explore presently, were aimed at this end. At the same time, he meant to bring about basic changes to the political, cultural, and economic conditions then prevalent in American society as a whole. This included the end of slavery as well as the granting of black suffrage and rights to political office, a program for universal public education, economic provisions for freed people, and the creation of a new culture of equal respect and recognition.

Although he understood the challenges, Douglass believed in the possibility of progress. He did have periods of doubt, anger, and despair—reasonable reactions to setbacks that included the Fugitive Slave Act, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the *Dred Scott* decision in the 1850s, and later the post-Reconstruction retrenchment that disenfranchised blacks and spawned a new era of violence and cultural bias.<sup>13</sup> Yet in his speeches and writings he never ceased to express optimism that freedom would eventually come. His optimism, like his political activism more generally, was both principled and strategic. On the one hand, he believed that the universe is a moral one and that the law of nature is "self-executing."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Douglass, letter to William Lloyd Garrison, January 1, 1846, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John R. McKivigan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), ser. 3, 1:73. See also Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 1:3.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), in *Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 189. See also Peter C. Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 15, 17, 59–60. For further discussion of Douglass's views on moral law and his guiding principles, see Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 6, 8, 107; Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 165, ix; and

In some periods of his life, he seems to have seen God as an enforcer of natural law and a guarantor of moral progress. He also clearly regarded self-interest as a mechanism that over time will motivate individuals to bring their behavior into conformity with natural law. As it related to slavery, for instance, Douglass was convinced that slavery violated the fundamental interests of not only slaves themselves but also their masters, and everyone else whose character was shaped by that debasing system. As they came to understand the threats to their own interests that slavery entailed, individuals would have a natural motive to abolish it. On the other hand, there is no doubt that some of Douglass's expressions of optimism were rhetorical. He once remarked that "hope is a powerful motive to exertion and high endeavor."<sup>15</sup> To stimulate individual initiative and the reform of society, he needed to make people believe in possibilities that seemed to be out of reach.<sup>16</sup> His optimism was partly prophetic, in the language of Cornel West, meant to inspire the very progress that he promised.<sup>17</sup>

Douglass's influence on American political development was immense. He helped shape the course of progressive political change and public policy through the majority of the nineteenth century. Although by century's close, retrenchment had become the rule and many of the reforms he had fought for were in decline, the words and ideas of Douglass outlived the man. They inspired and instructed black leaders and the wider society in the civil rights movement of the twentieth century, and they now offer fruitful perspective for our own time. Douglass has always had critics too, of course, and virtually every aspect of his life and work has come under fire in some way. Two strands of criticism in particular have been especially influential and are pertinent to the assessment developed here. The first is the radical and anti-individualist critique, which holds that Douglass was too accepting of the constitutive principles of American liberal democracy, including the notion of natural rights and the ideals of individual independence and self-reliance. These principles, the critics say, were (and remain) insufficient to establish freedom and equality for black people in the United States. As they see it, Douglass effectively blamed the victims of America's racial caste system and turned a blind eye to the true causes of black oppression, which were structural forces, including first slavery and later a racially inflected system of economic servitude and cultural stigma. Douglass was a dupe, and by legitimating the American principles he made himself a collaborator with a regime that never had any intention of delivering on the promises he thought it had made.

The second critique holds that Douglass's life and work were marred by a deep

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David E. Schrader, "Natural Law in the Constitutional Thought of Frederick Douglass," in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, 96–97.

<sup>15</sup> Douglass, "In Law Free; in Fact, A Slave: An Address Delivered in Washington D.C., on 16 April 1888," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), ser. 1, 5:359.

<sup>16</sup> See Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> West, *Black Prophetic Fire*. Note that West is as critical of Douglass as inspired by him, however. See *Black Prophetic Fire*, 11–40.

inconsistency insofar as he simultaneously defended self-reliance for black people and argued that the country owed them a fairly broad range of social provisions. The inconsistency seems to suggest conflicting assumptions about the conditions of freedom. It constitutes a “paradox” that troubles his legacy, for the inconsistency makes it difficult to know which of the ostensibly contrary priorities that Douglass identified ought to be pursued.<sup>18</sup> It also makes his words easy to co-opt for partisans on each side of the political divide that is so prevalent in debates about racial inequality today. Consequently, Douglass is invoked by the Left and the Right to justify fundamentally opposed policies, with results that do more to confuse than to advance public deliberation on these important matters.

The critics are not altogether wrong, for there is plenty of evidence in the words of Douglass to support their characterizations. Nevertheless, Douglass was neither as naively individualistic nor as inconsistent as he is often said to be. There is a logic that makes good sense of his views on freedom, but to see this logic we must examine his words through a lens that he did not himself provide.

## 2. Nonsovereign Agency and the Plural Conditions of Freedom

Taken together, the words and deeds of Douglass over the long term point to an underlying nonsovereign conception of human agency that he never fully articulated but that helps make sense of what he believed. The notion of nonsovereign agency was first introduced by Hannah Arendt, and it has gained considerable attention in recent years.<sup>19</sup> Part of its appeal lies in the way it integrates personal initiative with the intersubjective conditions of individual efficacy, thus avoiding the unproductive “structure–agency” divide that plagues so much contemporary work on racial inequality, obfuscating key features of reality and exacerbating partisan policy divisions. The nonsovereign view shows structure to be an integral dimension of individual agency, but it also includes individual effort and initiative.

As Arendt puts it in *The Human Condition*, there are “two parts” to any action, “the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by ‘bearing’ and ‘finishing’ the enterprise, by seeing it through.”<sup>20</sup> Action’s first moment involves individual initiative, the effort to begin something new, to make something happen.<sup>21</sup> Yet in the public sphere, action “is never possible in isolation” but “needs the presence of others” to be effective.<sup>22</sup> Other people are needed as “co-actors” who participate with the agent in “the actual achievement” of her

<sup>18</sup> Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); see also, inter alia, Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Sharon R. Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 189. This paragraph and the one that follows draws from Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty*, 4, 29–30.

<sup>21</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 177.

<sup>22</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 188.

“enterprise” or objective.<sup>23</sup> Just as a leader’s initiatives depend for their success on the support of his followers, so the enterprises of any individual regularly require a community of “bearers” to help bring them to fruition. To act in social and political life is to insert ourselves into a reverberating web of human responses and effects. The beliefs, values, and intentions of others affect how we affect the world; they shape the unfolding narrative of enterprises and effects that constitutes the story of what we have done. Arendt referred to human agency as “nonsovereign” in view of the fact that it could not be reduced to personal control over action or simple self-determination, even though individual initiative plays a crucial role.

To be an agent, on this view, is to affect the world in ways that concretely manifest who you are, to see yourself and be seen by others in the effects you have had, to recognize your deeds as being in some sense your own. Without a reflexive sense of self, you cannot have the experience of seeing yourself in your deed, and consequently there is no agency without personal identity. At the same time, there is also no agency without effects. Agency involves real action and impact on the world; agency is different from mere willing in this way, or dreaming. If we acknowledge the efficacy dimension of agency, we must admit that agency is not an exclusively internal property of the person and not reducible to individual will or control over one’s action. The reason agency is not reducible in this way is that our effects frequently depend on the social uptake provided by other people—on how they interpret what we are doing and how they respond to it. Action is not always subject to social uptake, of course. I can flip on a light switch without needing social uptake to bring the action to fruition. Yet a great deal of action in the social and political domains does depend on uptake. The impact we have on the world is not always captured by our intentions or fully subject to our control; it often depends on how other people interpret and respond to our initiatives. Agency is a socially distributed phenomenon in this sense, an emergent property of the communicative exchanges, background meanings, social interpretations, personal intentions, self-understandings, and even bodily encounters through which one’s identity comes to be manifest in one’s deeds.

It may seem strange to align Douglass with a nonsovereign view of human agency, given the emphasis he placed on personal independence and self-reliance.<sup>24</sup> Douglass is typically seen as “a model self-made man: an exemplary black version of uncommon achievement primarily through the agency of a resolute will and hard toil.”<sup>25</sup> He is famous for insisting that “no power outside of himself can prevent a man from sustaining an honorable character and a useful

23 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 190.

24 Arendt’s insensitivity to the disabling effects of racial inequality in the social sphere also may seem to make the association between Arendt and Douglass incongruous. Arendt’s notion of nonsovereignty does help illuminate Douglass, but Douglass also helps us see deficits in Arendt’s view, and he offers important perspective that enriches the theory of nonsovereign freedom in ways that reach beyond Arendt. This issue is addressed below.

25 Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 253.

relation to his day and generation—that . . . races, like individuals, must stand or fall by their own merits.”<sup>26</sup> His speech titled “Self-Made Men” was “his most popular lecture,” delivered on countless occasions at podiums around the country.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, when reflecting in January 1862 on the question of what should be done with the slaves in the event of their emancipation, Douglass’s answer was to “do nothing with them.” His reasoning was that “if men were born in need of crutches, instead of having legs . . . we should then be in need of help, and would require outside aid.” Instead “our duty is done better by not hindering than by helping our fellow-men; or, in other words, the best way to help them is just to let them help themselves.”<sup>28</sup> In contrast to Arendt, Douglass seems to locate human agency squarely within the individual, and to deny the intersubjective conditions of its emergence. In short, he seems to hold to a sovereign view of agency.

The notion of personal sovereignty that appears to be conveyed in these passages is also frequently associated with the dramatic story that Douglass tells of his fight with the slavemaster Covey. Following a long string of beatings, Douglass had finally resolved that if Covey should come after him again, he would “defend and protect myself to the best of my ability.”<sup>29</sup> When Covey did come after him,

26 Douglass, *Life and Times*, 913.

27 Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 256. It is worth noting that the speech is more nuanced than its title suggests. It does celebrate the “self-made men” who, “under peculiar difficulties and without the ordinary helps of favoring circumstances, have attained knowledge, usefulness, power and position” (Douglass, “Self-Made Men: An Address Delivered in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in March 1893,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 3:549–50). It also locates the cause of their success primarily in “honest labor, faithfully, steadily and persistently pursued” (560, 556). Yet Douglass makes it clear that in “awarding praise to industry, as the main agency in the production and culture of self-made men,” he does not mean to “exclude other factors” (560) such as social status and material conditions. Indeed Douglass begins his discussion of self-made men by acknowledging that “properly speaking, there are in the world no such men as self-made men. That term implies an individual independence of the past and present which can never exist” (549). “I believe in individuality,” Douglass says in the speech, “but individuals are, to the mass, like waves to the ocean. The highest order of genius . . . derives its power and greatness from the grandeur and vastness of the ocean of which it forms a part” (549).

Moreover, when considering what the theory of self-made men implied for the treatment of African Americans, Douglass held that the best thing to do was to “give the negro fair play and let him alone” (557). Yet he insisted that “fair play” included “a good deal more than some understand by fair play” (557). As he put it, “It is not fair play to start the negro out in life, from nothing and with nothing, while others start with the advantage of a thousand years behind them. . . . Should the American people put a school house in every valley of the South and a church on every hill side and supply the one with teachers and the other with preachers, for a hundred years to come, they would not then have given fair play to the negro” (557). Fair play required the country to throw open to the negro “the doors of the schools, the factories, the workshops, and of all mechanical industries . . . [to] give him all the facilities for honest and successful livelihood, and in all honorable avocations receive him as a man among men” (557). The speech thus conveys an understanding of the ways that individual agency is embedded in and dependent on social factors for support, a view that is consistently reflected in Douglass’s life and works, as we shall see.

28 Douglass, “What Shall be Done with the Slaves if Emancipated?,” 1862, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 472.

29 Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 587. Page numbers referring to *Life and Times* in the following paragraphs are inserted parenthetically into the text.

Douglass fought back—and won. Covey never again laid a hand on him. Douglass describes the battle as “the turning point” in his life as a slave because it “re-kindled in my breast the smouldering embers of liberty” and “revived a sense of my own manhood. I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before—I was a man now” (591). He goes on to describe the experience as “a resurrection from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom.” The experience made him “a free man in *fact*, though I still remained a slave in *form*,” because his spirit had been “roused to an attitude of independence” (591; original emphasis).<sup>30</sup> Here the exercise of agency seems to be fully within Douglass’s individual control. He seems to locate his own agency solely in his initiative, to present it as the product of nothing other than his own will, and so to instantiate an ideal of personal sovereignty.

There is more to the story than the spontaneous eruption of individual initiative, however. Initiative plays a key role, to be sure. And Douglass draws our attention to “the daring spirit” that drove this initiative (588). Yet the effect of Douglass’s initiative in resisting Covey depended on more than his own daring spirit and individual will. Douglass frames the story in *Life and Times* in a way that makes evident a broader social context. The day before the fight, a slave named Sandy, knowing of the repeated abuse that Douglass was enduring, had given him the root of a special herb said to possess “all the powers required for my protection” (585). Although Douglass was skeptical about the power of the root, he was moved by the force of Sandy’s kindness and confidence, which encouraged him to go forward “bravely” (586). Sandy, Douglass says, “found me and helped me when I could not help myself” (586). Douglass not only “enlisted him on my behalf” but also made Sandy’s wife “a sharer in my sorrows” (586). Having been comforted, fed, and sheltered by the two of them overnight, and with the root tucked away in his pocket, the next morning Douglass “moved off quite courageously toward the dreaded Covey’s” (586). When Douglass later springs into action, we are meant to understand his initiative as having been fueled in part by the support and solidarity he found with Sandy and his wife.

Likewise, his initiative would have been far less effective if the other slaves who were present that day had responded differently to what he did.<sup>31</sup> Douglass tells us that when Covey realized he could not immediately vanquish Douglass, he called for assistance from a slave named Bill, who was nearby (589). Instead of assisting Covey, however, “Bill, who knew precisely what Covey wished him to do, affected ignorance, and pretended he did not know what to do” (589). He

30 See Neil Roberts’s discussion of Douglass’s fugitive theory of freedom in *Freedom as Maroonage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

31 See Levine’s illuminating analysis of the Covey incident and Douglass’s multiple retellings of it in Robert S. Levine, “Identity in the Autobiographies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass*, ed. Maurice S. Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 37–38; and Turner, *Awakening to Race*, 51–52. Note also McFeely’s insistence that while Douglass’s escape from slavery is itself often seen as a spontaneous individual act, in truth it involved “an active network of antislavery people.” McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 70.

eventually walked off, leaving Covey on his own. When Covey then tried to enlist the aid of another slave named Caroline, she “answered the command of her master . . . precisely as Bill had done” (590). Douglass makes it clear that the outcome of his effort would have been far different if either one of them had joined the battle on Covey’s behalf. Exhausted as Douglass was by then, he surely would have been beaten into submission (590). **Thus even as he emphasizes his own initiative, Douglass also characterizes the event as something of a collective act, saying that “we were all in open rebellion that morning” (590).** Bill and Caroline were like the “bearers” described by Arendt, who help bring the initiative of the individual agent to fruition. Douglass’s initiative had the good luck to fall onto a field of social meaning in which the other slaves interpreted it as an act of justified resistance to “the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant” and responded accordingly (591). Their interpretation and responses enabled “the actual achievement” of the action begun (but *only* begun) by Douglass’s individual initiative. He himself did do something, but he did not do it *by* himself.

Covey’s own response to the initiative that Douglass began was also an important part of its reception. Douglass tells us that Covey was stunned by the rebellion and clearly afraid when he realized that Douglass would not be subdued. When he asked Douglass if he meant to persist in his resistance, Douglass told him “that I did mean to resist, come what might, that I had been treated like a brute during the last six months, and that I should stand it no longer” (589). Covey “trembled in every limb” and “seemed to have lost his usual strength and coolness. He was frightened” and “seemingly unable to command words or blows” (588–89). Douglass’s use of the word *command* here is telling. It points to the fact that Covey’s moral and psychological authority has suddenly dissolved, along with his physical control. By insisting that he should no longer be treated “like a brute,” Douglass indicts Covey’s rule, unmasking its false claim to legitimacy and calling it out as the cruel tyranny it is. True, by the end of the fight Covey still holds legal authority over Douglass, who remains formally a slave. Yet the fight has put the two men on equal ground physically, morally, and psychologically, and Covey’s fear is an implicit recognition of this shift. Douglass says that at the moment he found his own fingers “attached to the throat of the tyrant” it was “as if we stood as equals,” and “the very color of the man was forgotten” (588). The interaction makes Douglass “a free man in fact” partly because of Covey’s lost authority and the equal footing on which they now find themselves, an equality reflected back to Douglass in Covey’s frightened response. This uptake by Covey helped complete the action that Douglass began.

Douglass admittedly describes the source of the freedom he finds here in terms that evoke an ideal of personal sovereignty. After resisting Covey, he says, “I was no longer a servile coward . . . but my long-cowed spirit was roused to an attitude of independence” (591). He goes on to characterize “a man without force” as a being “without the essential dignity of humanity” (591). Yet the soaring sense of

liberation Douglass experienced owed a great deal to the capitulating reaction of Covey, whose implicit acknowledgment of his own lost command was a key to the dynamic that unfolded between them. And it was only through this dynamic—the intersubjective iterated action and reaction that registered in both men’s bearing—that the full meaning and force of Douglass’s initiative was realized. The dynamic between them also incorporated the actions and reactions of Bill and Caroline. What made Douglass a free man in fact that day is not simply what he did; what made the difference is how what he did interacted with the interpretations and responses of others. Moreover, his initiative was itself enlivened by the support and solidarity of Sandy and his wife, who helped stoke the courage and confidence that powered it.

An implicit appreciation of the nonsovereignty of individual agency runs through many of Douglass’s speeches and writings, and it informs his understanding of what freedom requires. Douglass knew that both the individual initiative and the social reception aspects of human agency need support. The capacity for initiative presupposes a strong sense of self, marked by self-respect, confidence, and hope. This sense of self was deeply compromised by inequality in the form of both slavery and prejudice. As early as 1848, Douglass was insisting that prejudice “against myself and people subjects me to a thousand poisonous stings” and that this “oppression hath the power to make even a wise man mad.”<sup>32</sup> Oppression’s power to “make a wise man mad” is a phrase that Douglass returned to again and again throughout his life.<sup>33</sup> He meant to capture the way in which “in nearly every department of American life” black people were confronted by the “insidious influence” of prejudice. “It fills the air. It meets them at the workshop and factory. . . . It meets them at the church, at the hotel, at the ballot box.” This prejudice has a powerful effect on the individual, for it tends “to repress his manly ambition, paralyze his energies, and make him a dejected and spiritless man.”<sup>34</sup> In short, it undercuts the initiative dimension of individual agency.

It is true that Douglass sometimes spoke as if the individual could will himself to be impervious to these influences. Once when traveling by train he was forced to take a seat in the freight car because no “colored” seats were available. Booker T. Washington tells the story this way: “A friend went into the freight car to console him and said to him that he hated to see a man of his intelligence in so humiliating a position. ‘I am ashamed that they have thus degraded you.’ But

32 Douglass, “The Blood of the Slave on the Skirts of the Northern People,” 1848, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 122.

33 See, for example, Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 5 July 1852,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:362; “Strong to Suffer, and Yet Strong to Strive: An Address Delivered in Washington D.C., on 16 April 1886,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:230; and “Lynch Law in the South,” 1892, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 749.

34 Douglass, “The Color Line,” 1881, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 649–50. See also Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 122–23.



Douglass, straightening himself up in his seat, looked the friend in the face and said, 'They cannot degrade Frederick Douglass.' And so they cannot degrade a single individual who does not want to be degraded."<sup>35</sup>

Yet Douglass clearly believed that slavery and prejudice *can* degrade an individual against his will. He saw the effects of this dynamic all around him. When his daughter was prevented from entering the schoolroom occupied by white children at the private seminary in which he had enrolled her, Douglass decided to remove her from the school. He reasoned that "allowing her to remain there in such circumstances, could only serve to degrade her in her own eyes, and those of the other scholars attending the school."<sup>36</sup> Likewise he affirms that prejudice generates "poverty, ignorance, and degradation" among African Americans.<sup>37</sup> It produces characters "deficient in self-respect" or too "servile and cowardly to assert the true dignity of their manhood and that of their race."<sup>38</sup> Like slavery, it "robs its victims of self-reliance."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Douglass emphasizes that "all oppressed people have been thus afflicted."<sup>40</sup> Far from defending a view of human agency as impervious to social influence, Douglass regularly acknowledges the disabling effects that inequality has on the individual initiative side of agency.<sup>41</sup>

Relations of respect, mutual recognition, and solidarity can counter these effects. They help to nourish the self-respect and confidence needed to animate initiative. Sandy and his wife provided this kind of support to Douglass prior to his fight with Covey. Douglass also mentions the importance of the "band of brothers" he found among fellow slaves while laboring for William Freeland after he was removed from Covey's farm. He speaks of his debt to them and of the egalitarian terms of their bond. "There were no mean advantages taken of each other . . . and no elevating one at the expense of the other."<sup>42</sup> This context of equality and solidarity helped to kindle initiative in the form of "thoughts and sentiments" that were "incendiary" and pointed in the direction of "rebellion."<sup>43</sup> Eventually

35 Booker T. Washington, "On Making our Race Life Count in the Life of the Nation," in *African-American Social and Political Thought: 1850-1920*, ed. Howard Brotz (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995), 382.

36 Douglass, Letter to H. G. Warner, Esq., 30 March 1849, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 135.

37 Douglass, Letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 8 March 1853, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 214.

38 Douglass, "Parties Were Made for Men, Not Men for Parties: An Address Delivered in Louisville, Kentucky, on 25 September 1883," in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:89.

39 Douglass, Letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 216.

40 Douglass, "Parties Were Made for Men, Not Men for Parties," in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:89.

41 Turner emphasizes that in addition to legal status Douglass saw citizenship as "an intersubjective condition of reciprocal recognition" that is necessary to sustain freedom. Turner, "Douglass and Political Judgment," 212.

42 Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 601.

43 Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 601-2.

it gave rise to a joint escape attempt. Although the attempt was foiled, Douglass compares the spirit that animated their effort to the sensibility conveyed in Patrick Henry's famous call "Give me liberty or give me death!" That spirit was "a sublime one" for a free man such as Henry, he says, but "incomparably more sublime is the same sentiment when *practically* asserted by men accustomed to the lash and chain, men whose sensibilities must have become more or less deadened by their bondage."<sup>44</sup> The love, esteem, and confidence that Douglass shared with his fellow slaves enlivened their "sensibilities" and their initiative.

Douglass quite explicitly connects the support he received from friends over the years with his own remarkable achievements as an individual. Although "I have sometimes been credited with having been the architect of my own fortune, and have pretty generally received the title of a 'self-made man,'" he says, when he looks "back over the facts of my life . . . I am compelled to give [my friends] an equal measure of credit, with myself, for the success which has attended my labors in life."<sup>45</sup> Their willingness to "own me as a man and brother against all the scorn, contempt, and derision of a slavery-polluted atmosphere" made all the difference.<sup>46</sup> These relations of respect, recognition, and solidarity fueled his courage and confidence, and supported his capacity for initiative. The personal empowerment he felt when traveling in England tells a similar story. There he found that "the instant I stepped upon the shore, and looked into the faces around me, I saw in every man a recognition of my own manhood . . . and an absence of everything like that disgusting hate with which we are pursued in this country."<sup>47</sup> Individual character is sensitive—for both better and worse—to the nature of the social relations in which it arises and functions. As Douglass once put it, "A man's character always takes its hue, more or less, from the forms and color of things about him."<sup>48</sup> The initiative aspect of individual agency, which is a function of character, can be hobbled by social context, but it can also be nourished by context. What makes the difference is the degree to which the context manifests relations of respect, recognition, and solidarity.

This fuller picture of Douglass's view tempers the conventional portrait of him as a radical individualist who champions an ideal of personal sovereignty, ignoring the power of social relations and denying the value of mutuality. It shows his view to manifest an underlying logic of nonsovereignty. Moreover, Douglass's true convictions in this regard were fairly consistent over time. His implicit acknowledgment of the nonsovereign quality of human agency was not (as some have suggested) a late result of growing frustration in the post-Civil War period.

44 Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 611; emphasis in original.

45 Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 900.

46 Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 901.

47 Douglass, "Country, Conscience, and the Anti-slavery Cause: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 11 May 1847," in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:59.

48 Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 493.

Even in 1848 he could say that while “independence is an essential condition of respectability,” this does “not mean that we can become entirely independent of all men; that would be absurd and impossible.”<sup>49</sup> What he envisioned was rather a relation of mutual *interdependence*, meaning “that other members of the community shall be as dependent upon us, as we upon them.”<sup>50</sup>

The same context of respect, recognition, and solidarity that helps enliven individual initiatives also generates a social field of interpretation and response that is receptive to these initiatives and can help bring them to fruition, thus enabling agency on the efficacy side. This context is established in part through the provision of civil and political rights and economic opportunity. Rights give force and effect to individual initiatives, whereas their absence throws up obstacles to initiative at every turn. “The black man is not a free American citizen in the sense that a white man is a free American citizen,” because society is arranged to block his initiatives rather than sustain them. “If he attempts to send his children to the nearest public school . . . he is driven away and has no redress at law. If, after purchasing tickets for a ride in a first-class railway carriage, a colored person is hustled out into a smoking car, he or she has no redress.”<sup>51</sup> In a similar way, the denial of economic opportunity to black people means that even when individual initiative arises it has nowhere to go, no field of possibility in which to take root and grow. Both during and after slavery, black labor operated within an economic system that punished rather than rewarded individual initiative. Commenting on that system in 1883, Douglass remarked, “The trouble is not that the colored people of the South are indolent, but that no matter how hard or how persistent may be their industry, they get barely enough for their labor to support life.”<sup>52</sup> As under slavery, “the black man does the work and the white man gets the money.”<sup>53</sup> In the face of such conditions, the individual agent finds no uptake for his initiative, for this initiative is systematically prevented from coming to fruition. The nonsovereign character of human agency means that without civil and political rights and economic opportunities, which establish a field of action for the exercise of individual initiative, there can be no freedom, because individual agency will consistently remain unrealized. Over time these conditions will tend to undercut the exercise of initiative as well, as individuals quite reasonably become demoralized and lose the self-respect and confidence that initiative requires.

49 Douglass, “An Address to the Colored People of the United States,” 1848, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 120.

50 Douglass, “An Address to the Colored People of the United States,” 1848, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 120.

51 Douglass, “Give Us the Freedom Intended for Us,” 1872, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 613.

52 Douglass, “Parties Were Made for Men, Not Men for Parties,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:99.

53 Douglass, “Parties Were Made for Men, Not Men for Parties,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:99.

In addition to the political and economic fields of reception for individual initiative, Douglass draws attention to the cultural one. How black people are perceived and represented in society has an impact on how others respond to them and hence on the effects they can have, on their agency. In the last decades of his life Douglass was increasingly alarmed by the rise of lynchings, which were often represented as punishment for sexual aggression by black men against white women. This persecution was “intended to blast and ruin the Negro’s character as a man and a citizen,” and it succeeded “thoroughly.”<sup>54</sup> It promulgated a cultural perception of black men as violent and threatening, and shaped white people’s interpretation and responses to their actions accordingly. Its “perpetual reiteration in our newspapers and magazines has led men and women to regard [black men] with averted eyes, dark suspicion and increasing hate.”<sup>55</sup> This cultural background established a hostile field for the reception of individual initiative and undercut black men’s agency.

More generally, Douglass points out, “all presumptions are arrayed against [African Americans], unless we except the presumption of inferiority and worthlessness.”<sup>56</sup> This stigma primes white people to interpret the actions of blacks in ways that justify and reinforce their subordinate status, whatever the intentions and capacities of any particular black person might be:

If his course is downward, he meets very little resistance, but if upward, his way is disputed at every turn of the road. If he comes in rags and in wretchedness, he answers the public demand for a Negro, and provokes no anger, though he may provoke derision, but if he presumes to be a gentleman and a scholar, he is then entirely out of place. He excites resentment and calls forth stern and bitter opposition. If he offers himself to a builder as mechanic, to a client as a lawyer, to a patient as a physician, to a university as a professor, or to a department as a clerk, no matter what may be his ability or attainments, there is a presumption based upon his color or previous condition, of incompetency, and if he succeeds at all, he has to do so against this most discouraging presumption.<sup>57</sup>

In effect, there is plenty of social uptake for initiatives by black people that appear to confirm their inferiority but no uptake for initiatives that advance their actual purposes and realize their aims. This cultural dynamic is reinforced by “the press and the pulpit,”<sup>58</sup> and its powerful effects are further evidence of the nonsovereign

54 Douglass, “Why Is the Negro Lynched?,” 1894, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 760.

55 Douglass, “Why Is the Negro Lynched?,” 1894, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 760.

56 Douglass, “Our Destiny Is Largely in Our Hands: An Address Delivered in Washington D.C., on 16 April 1883,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, 63.

57 Douglass, “Our Destiny Is Largely in Our Hands,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, 63.

58 Douglass, “Our Destiny Is Largely in Our Hands,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, 64; and “Lynch Law in the South,” 1892, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 750.

character of human agency. Like the absence of rights and economic opportunity, cultural bias has a disabling influence on the agency of African Americans because agency is a socially distributed phenomenon that includes more than merely individual initiative.

The two sides of human agency—individual initiative and social uptake—are both necessary; agency arises only where they intersect. Consequently, freedom requires supporting both initiative and uptake. Douglass's diagnosis of the African American condition makes this clear, however implicitly, and it demonstrates that both sides in the agency equation are compromised for black people as a result of American political, economic, and cultural practices. He once said that "no man can be truly free whose liberty is dependent on the thought, feeling, and action of others."<sup>59</sup> This comment is often interpreted as a mark of radical individualism or a sovereigntist view of human agency. Yet when read against the background of the preceding analysis, its meaning is quite different. What it points to is not a sovereign individual, impervious to the influence of others, whose agency arises fully formed through the exercise of his personal will alone. Instead it calls us to envision a society of reciprocal recognition and interdependence in which the social influences we cannot avoid have the effect of enlivening individual initiative and sustaining social uptake, thus mutually fostering freedom for all.<sup>60</sup>

If the Arendtian notion of nonsovereignty helps us make sense of Douglass's vision in this regard, his vision also enriches the idea of nonsovereign freedom in ways that take us beyond Arendt. She was strangely blind to the ways that racial inequality in midcentury American society undermined individual initiative and disrupted social uptake for African Americans, thus disabling their agency on both its dimensions.<sup>61</sup> She failed to see that what civil rights activists were doing in protesting segregation was an effort to cultivate social uptake, and she failed to acknowledge just how crucial such uptake was to their agency and their freedom. In "Reflections on Little Rock," for instance, she remarked that "discrimination and social segregation are not the problem" for American blacks, and that only "racial legislation" could compromise their freedom.<sup>62</sup> Although she held that formal legal equality was a requirement in politics, she believed that inequality and discrimination were acceptable—even valuable—in society. "What equality is to

59 Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 815.

60 Thus Myers maintains that Douglass's "do nothing" doctrine is "grossly misconceived" if it is thought to imply a simple "laissez-faire individualism." Myers, *Frederick Douglass*, 112. Instead Douglass championed "a broad array of affirmative as well as negative duties of government, involving not only protective but also remedial and developmental powers" (113; see also 144). Turner likewise argues that Douglass "upholds the ideal of the self-made man" because "he sees practical value in it" even though he recognizes its limitations. The ideal could help counter the degraded "sense of the possible" among slaves and former slaves, and thereby inspire agency. Turner, *Awakening to Race*, 51.

61 Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003).

62 Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 194, 197.

the body politic,” she says, namely “its innermost principle,” so “discrimination is to society.”<sup>63</sup> The question was not how to abolish social discrimination, on her view, but “how to keep it confined within the social sphere, where it is legitimate, and prevent its trespassing on the political and the personal sphere, where it is destructive.”<sup>64</sup> Douglass’s work makes clear just how misguided she was on this score. To theorize nonsovereign freedom with Douglass is to radically deepen the meaning of freedom in ways that exceed Arendt’s own understanding. It highlights the importance of theorizing freedom from the margins of society and not only from the perspective of the privileged.

The distinctive vision of nonsovereign freedom that Douglass offers is something he pursued throughout his life. There is no contradiction or paradox in the fact that he sought to inspire individual initiative among African Americans and also provide social and economic resources for them. These twin foci reflect the two-dimensional nature of human agency as a nonsovereign experience. They also help explain the distinctive character and complexity of Douglass’s political activism. Given the nonsovereign nature of human agency and the social context of racial inequality, the achievement of freedom for African Americans called for a plural approach.

### 3. The Plurality of Political Resistance

“In all relations of life and death,” Douglass said in an 1883 speech, “we are met by the color line. We cannot ignore it if we would, and ought not if we could.”<sup>65</sup> The color line both enervated individual initiative among African Americans and undercut its effects. Douglass targeted his political resistance to address both conditions, and this resistance took diverse forms. It included physical acts of opposition to the abuse of power as well as deliberative public engagement and eventually the use of institutional political power for the purpose of reform. His activism against racial injustice was therefore pluralist in both its ends and its forms.

Many of the remarks that Douglass made enjoining black people to “elevation” and “uplift” were intended to resist racial injustice by guiding African Americans to the individual initiative dimension of their own agency. While recruiting black men to join the Union Army in 1863, he exhorted the crowd to “recover your own self-respect” and “rise from your social debasement.” The effect will be to “stand more erect, walk more assured, feel more at ease.”<sup>66</sup> Douglass sought to counter the demoralizing impact of internalized prejudice and the soul-killing effects of slavery by articulating aspirations well beyond what the white world would con-

63 Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 205.

64 Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 206.

65 Douglass, “Parties Were Made for Men, Not Men for Parties,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:94.

66 Douglass, “Why Should a Colored Man Enlist?,” 1863, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 530.

cede. Again and again he exhorts black men and women to believe in themselves and in each other. His advocacy of federally funded public education and of trade schools for instilling the mechanical arts followed a similar logic. Education and practical skills, he thought, would cultivate the capabilities and confidence that animate individual initiative. Likewise, the perennial optimism that one hears in his speeches and writings was partly aimed at inspiring personal initiative. Although not afraid to acknowledge the negative (as when he spoke about “the deplorable condition of the Negro in the Southern states” in 1888), Douglass almost always infused his message with hope because he was convinced, as we have seen, that “hope is a powerful motive to exertion and high endeavor.”<sup>67</sup> His tenacious hope was of a piece with his efforts at uplift, all intended to kindle the initiative dimension of individual agency.

Even as he sought to animate individual initiative, Douglass also agitated for provision of the political, economic, and cultural resources needed to make this initiative impactful. The end of slavery was of course his first objective in this regard, but after emancipation he became active in the movements for black suffrage and civil rights. Still later, after the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments had been essentially gutted by the rise of Black Laws and Jim Crow, Douglass campaigned for their renewal and effective enforcement. Likewise, he worked to establish economic policies that would enhance the agency of former slaves. Southern blacks “need, and ought to have, the material aid of both white and colored people of the free states,” he insisted in 1886.<sup>68</sup> The kind of aid he championed was aimed at providing new fields of opportunity through which black initiative could be brought to fruition as effective action. He planned and for a time ran the Freedmen’s Bank and Loan program, which provided federal dollars for the purchase of land and farm equipment. He also campaigned against landlord-tenant laws, which he believed thwarted initiative and undercut agency.<sup>69</sup>

On the cultural front, he targeted the most influential opinion-setters of the day, namely the churches and the print media, knowing that the messages they delivered had a powerful impact on the agency of African Americans. “The press and the pulpit” are “the men who make public sentiment,” and a change in this sentiment “can be easily effected by these forces whenever they shall elect to make the effort.”<sup>70</sup> He not only criticized and exhorted those at the helms of the dominant public opinion outlets but took up posts through which he could contribute to those outlets directly. Soon after his escape from slavery he became certified

67 Douglass, “In Law Free; in Fact, a Slave,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:358–59.

68 Douglass, “Strong to Suffer, and Yet Strong to Strive,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:233.

69 Douglass, “In Law Free; in Fact, a Slave,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 5:365–67.

70 Douglass, “Lynch Law in the South,” 1892, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 750.

as an AME minister, for example, and for a time he preached on occasion.<sup>71</sup> His public orations in the lecture hall also countered the messages on race that were being delivered from most American pulpits. At the same time, as a newspaper editor he promulgated progressive principles intended to disrupt the status quo. Among other things, he took every opportunity to call out and combat what he referred to as “colorphobia,” meaning racial prejudice and its countless informal expressions in interpersonal interactions. Colorphobia’s effect on human agency was vast, but Douglass was convinced that by exposing it, and sometimes ridiculing it, he could help to neutralize its influence.<sup>72</sup>

One of the plural forms that political activism took for Douglass was physical resistance. His own fight with Covey is a famous example, but there are others as well. Although early in his public career he expressed pacifist sentiments in keeping with the Garrisonian position and a certain strand of Christianity, Douglass changed his view fairly quickly. He came to believe, as he said repeatedly over the years, that those “who would be free, themselves must strike the blow.”<sup>73</sup> There could be no end to slavery without agitation, including violent agitation. Slavery was an intrinsically violent system, and it was not likely to be conceded peacefully: “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. . . . We must [resist] by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others.”<sup>74</sup>

Douglass was consistent in defending the moral right of slaves to rebel, and he extended this logic at one point to cover the killing of slave catchers.<sup>75</sup> He was a good friend of John Brown and supported Brown publicly against those who called him crazy or unethical. It is true that Douglass did not join the famous failed attack at Harpers Ferry. Yet the reason was not that he doubted its justice. What Douglass doubted was its chance of success. He thought it patently impossible for a small band of poorly armed slaves to succeed against the full force of the US military, and in this he proved correct. If he had an ethical objection to Brown’s plan, it was that he did not think it right to knowingly sacrifice lives for a plot that could not succeed. Where slave rebellions stood a chance of succeeding, by contrast,

71 Blight, *Frederick Douglass’s Civil War*, 7.

72 Douglass, “Colorphobia in New York!,” 1849, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 142–43.

73 Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 914.

74 Douglass, “The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies: An Address Delivered in Canandaigua, New York, on 3 August 1857,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 3:204.

75 In an 1854 column titled “Is it Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnapper?” Douglass held that a slavecatcher had “forfeited his right to live,” and that the killing of slavecatchers was a justified, “innocent” act. Cited in Blight, *Frederick Douglass’s Civil War*, 93–94.



he supported them. Their virtue lay not only in the liberation they achieved for the particular slaves involved but also in the fear they would strike in the hearts of the master class.<sup>76</sup>

Douglass also argued insistently to government officials in the North and to blacks themselves (freemen and slaves) that black men should join the ranks of the Union forces and take up arms against the slave power.<sup>77</sup> As he saw it, physical resistance to slavery was good for freedom in multiple ways. It was itself an exercise of individual initiative, albeit in conjunction with others. As such it both manifested and reinforced the embers of self-respect and confidence that individual agency needs. At the same time, resistance in this form helped to challenge the prevailing public perceptions of African Americans as naturally subservient and hence not capable or worthy of liberty. It was therefore part of a broader effort, pursued by Douglass in other ways as well, to establish new cultural beliefs and values that would provide social uptake for black initiatives.

A second form of political activism that Douglass embodied was what might be called “deliberative resistance,” or critical public engagement.<sup>78</sup> Beginning with his first address to the antislavery meeting in Nantucket in 1841, Douglass used the power of argument to influence public opinion on the issues of slavery and racial equality. He did this in person over a period of fifty years on the lecture circuit, and he did it in print, both with his own writings and with the other things he published as the editor of the *North Star* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. His deliberative engagement was very much a form of political resistance. The content of his speeches and writings attacked the country’s dominant beliefs about black people and the values that justified slavery and prejudice. Then too, his public presence itself—his eloquence, his intelligence, his visible strength of character—dealt a heavy blow to status-quo public opinion. It was difficult to see him in action and not come to doubt the validity of “the color line” and all it stood for. Douglass’s deliberative resistance addressed the general public through his speeches and writings, but it also targeted key political elites, often through private letters and personal appeals. From the start of the Civil War, for example, Douglass argued to the nation’s top military commanders and ultimately to President Lincoln himself that the Union ought to enlist black soldiers, and that emancipating the slaves would vastly increase the ranks of available men and powerfully motivate them to serve.<sup>79</sup> Later, once black soldiers had begun to be

76 Boxill notes that after Douglass abandoned pacifism, he came to believe that “resistance could arouse certain feelings—fear especially—that could clear the moral vision, and consequently that resistance, properly executed, could be a part of moral suasion.” Boxill, “Douglass against the Emigrationists,” 42.

77 Douglass, “Men of Color, to Arms!” in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 526–31.

78 For an interesting discussion of the “dense discursive context” in which Douglass was engaged, see Sara Meer, “Douglass as Orator and Editor,” in *Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass*, 47.

79 Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 773–78.

enlisted in substantial numbers, Douglass argued for their fair compensation and decent treatment. In his letters to Major G. L. Stearns and his description of his personal conversations with the president we see his deliberative resistance on full display.<sup>80</sup>

Deliberative resistance is a complex form of political activism because of the way in which it simultaneously opposes and affirms existing beliefs and values. Douglass regularly appealed in his public arguments to the principles contained in the American Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Critics have often faulted him for this, seeing his efforts as insufficiently radical. After his break with the Garrisonians in 1850, Douglass's expressed view of the country's founding principles was that they were fundamentally consistent with the ideals of equality and fairness that he identified with natural law.<sup>81</sup> He believed that the country had failed to live up to its principles, and he made America's hypocrisy the subject of passionate, piercing critique. In a famous speech delivered on July 5, 1852, Douglass asked:

What, to the American slave, is your 4<sup>th</sup> of July? I answer: **A day that reveals to him . . . the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.** To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery . . . a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.<sup>82</sup>

If the country's failure to live up to its principles was the problem, the principles themselves were for Douglass a key part of the solution. "The Declaration of Independence is the ringbolt" to the nation's redemption; these are "saving principles" that light the way to right reform.<sup>83</sup> In addition to believing in the moral truth of the American principles, Douglass clearly understood the power of their rhetorical force. Deliberative resistance effects political change by transforming minds and hearts through the force of argument and reflective feeling.<sup>84</sup> He con-

80 Douglass, letter to Major G. L. Stearns, August 1, 1863, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 538–40; and "Emancipation, Racism, and the Work before Us: An Address Delivered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on 4 December 1863," in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 3:605–9. See also Douglass, *Life and Times*, in *Autobiographies*, 784–88.

81 Whether this view represented a sincere belief or a shrewd rhetorical strategy on Douglass's part is difficult to determine with certainty. For Douglass, the two often went together.

82 Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July? An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 5 July 1852," in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:371.

83 Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 2:363–64.

84 See Jason Frank's discussion of how Douglass's Fourth of July speech embodied "a constituent moment" that "both spoke from outside the people to whom his speech was addressed

sequently considered the American principles, and the patriotic sentiments they evoked, to be valuable weapons of deliberative resistance. He used them both to elicit individual initiative and to create a new community of bearers to receive that initiative.<sup>85</sup>

A third form of political activism that we see in Douglass's life and work is the marshaling of established political power for the purpose of reform. One example of this is his effort to use the federal government to bring an end to slavery. Douglass had numerous reasons for breaking with the Garrisonians, but one of them was his conviction that the slave power in the South was far too strong a force to fall without the help of the federal government. The Garrisonian position held that because the Constitution was a slaver's document, the government it established was illegitimate and not entitled to allegiance. Garrison and his followers advocated a kind of political withdrawalism, including disengagement from the South and nonparticipation in the government of the North. Douglass insisted that Garrison's doctrine of "no union with slaveholders" would in practice end up "leaving the slave to free himself."<sup>86</sup> It assumes, he said, "that a population of slaves, without arms, without means of concert, and without leisure, is more than a match for double its number, educated, accustomed to rule, and in every way prepared for warfare, offensive or defensive," and hence it "consents to leave the slave's freedom to a most uncertain and improbable, if not an impossible, contingency."<sup>87</sup> The federal government was the only available instrument with the power to successfully destroy slavery as a system. The only way to make use of this instrument was to preserve the Union and to make the antislavery cause a "political force," meaning a policy that the federal government took responsibility for enacting.<sup>88</sup> Douglass thought it perverse for the abolitionists to deny themselves the most forceful weapon available.

After emancipation, Douglass argued for the federal government to take an active role in reconstruction, both by funding economic programs for freed people and by maintaining a presence in the Southern states to ensure respect for the new rights established by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. He continued to believe that the reforms needed to bring about racial justice had to be

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and claimed to speak in their higher name." Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 211.

<sup>85</sup> Frank contends that with this speech Douglass "set the stage for the emergence of another people." Frank, *Constituent Moments*, 235. Gregg Crane likewise argues that the speech meant to transform both blacks and whites, to change "slaves into citizens" and "to convert the self-satisfied members of a mythic Anglo-Saxon clan into citizens." Crane, "Human Law and Higher Law," in *Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass*, 100.

<sup>86</sup> Douglass, "The Anti-slavery Moment: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 19 March 1855," in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 3:41.

<sup>87</sup> Douglass, "Anti-slavery Moment," in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1, 3:42.

<sup>88</sup> Douglass, "A Call to Work," 1852, in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 211.

backed by the power of government if they were to stand any chance of succeeding. He was right. When the federal government began to pull back in the 1870s, withdrawing its financial support and removing the troops who had enforced the Reconstruction amendments in the Southern states, retrenchment quickly ensued.<sup>89</sup>

Douglass also sought to use the power of government for political reform by occupying political office himself. He has been criticized for this, both for being self-serving and for participating in a government that was marred by racial injustice.<sup>90</sup> Douglass did care about public stature and he wanted to make a good living, and he was regularly conflicted about the mixed (at best) record of the government agencies he served. Yet he also quite clearly believed that the political offices he held equipped him with resources for making change that would otherwise be out of his reach, and he thought it was important to throw his weight behind the Republican Party's efforts to enforce civil rights. He also felt that a black man in political office was in itself a form of political resistance because of the multiple ways it contested the color line and modeled a new public image of African Americans. That new image, he hoped, would inspire initiative among black people and help create the conditions for its social uptake, thus fostering agency and advancing freedom.

To some extent, the plurality of political resistance in Douglass reflects the shifting terrain of American political life over the course of a tumultuous half century. His activism responded to the demands of the times, and the times changed. But this plurality also speaks to the nonsovereign nature of human agency. The two sides of agency require different kinds of effort to support their full flourishing. Some of these efforts overlap, but to advance both individual initiative and social uptake in ways that successfully regenerate black agency and achieve freedom requires a rich variety of activism. To be sure, while Douglass himself embodied multiple types of activism, he could not embody every type. We should learn from the plurality of political resistance in Douglass's life and work, and part of what we should learn is that this plurality extends *beyond* his life and work. The

89 For discussion of the racial dynamics of Reconstruction and its aftermath, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2002); John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Victoria E. Bynum, *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); John Michael Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875–1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

90 Martin criticizes Douglass for becoming increasingly “allied with mainstream political institutions in order to influence as wide an audience, white and black, as possible.” Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 80. The result was that he “exerted an increasingly conservative influence” in his later years (81) and “the critical edge of his political insight” became “dulled” (91). For a similar critique, see West, *Black Prophetic Fire*, 15–16.

forms of activism he pursued are not the only ones with value. His legacy should encourage us to be creative and open about the possibilities for political reform, and to welcome the plurality of political resistance that he modeled.

## Conclusions

In contrast to conventional interpretations and many of his critics, Douglass was neither a bootstrapping individualist nor a man at war with himself, defending fundamentally inconsistent positions over time. He was indeed an individualist, if that means one who insists upon the intrinsic dignity of the individual and defends individual freedom. He also believed that individual initiative is a necessary condition of freedom because it is a crucial component of human agency. Yet he was highly sensitive to the ways in which agency is socially distributed, or dependent on social uptake and support. He knew that initiative cannot arise in a vacuum and that it requires a receptive social field of understanding and opportunity to generate effective agency. If Douglass was an individualist, then, he was a highly nuanced one. And far from being inconsistent, the plural character of his political activism was responsive to the multidimensional conditions of freedom that result from agency's dual character. Freedom rests on a diversity of conditions, some that focus on the internal life of the individual and others that target the social context. To work for both, as Douglass did, is not a mark of inconsistency but an acknowledgment of the real complexity of human agency and the plural conditions of freedom.

In his work, Douglass sought not only the reform but the redemption of America.<sup>91</sup> The country's political failings involved inconceivable injustice, and political resistance in all its many forms was an ethical imperative. More than a hundred years after his death, America is still in need of the redemption that Douglass aimed to bring about. We could use a little of his conviction and his vision today. Despite the ostensible achievement of formal political equality, racial injustice continues to permeate American society. Fifty years after the civil rights movement, African Americans are twice as likely to be unemployed than are whites, three times more likely to live in poverty, and more than six times as likely to be imprisoned.<sup>92</sup> Blacks also suffer at higher rates from chronic disease, and they die younger.<sup>93</sup> These inequalities undermine individual agency in systematic ways,

91 For a rich discussion of the themes of race and redemption in American politics, see George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

92 "Report Sees 'Sobering Statistics' on Racial Inequality," CNN.com, March 25, 2009, [www.cnn.com/2009/US/03/25/black.america.report/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/03/25/black.america.report/index.html).

93 A 2005 report by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for example, found that "for many health conditions, non-Hispanic blacks bear a disproportionate burden of disease, injury, death, and disability." See "Health Disparities Experienced by Black or African Americans—United States," *MMWR (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report)* 54, no. 1 (Janu-

and in doing so they compromise both justice and freedom. The cultural background of racial stigma and bias that underlies racial inequality today is more than merely unfair; it is also deadly, as the recurrent killings of unarmed young black men by police officers and the elevated mortality rates of black babies demonstrate.<sup>94</sup>

Our public responses to this injustice have been weak and ineffectual. In part, our failure to meet the challenges of racial inequality today results from an inadequate understanding of the dynamics of human agency. We vacillate between an exaggerated conception of agency as personal sovereignty, on the one hand, and a picture of agency that reduces it to the simple effect of social factors, on the other. Either the individual is portrayed as capable of rising above her circumstances through the sheer exercise of will, or she is seen as the mere victim of these circumstances, the plaything of structural forces that deny the value and even the possibility of personal initiative. When read through the lens of the nonsovereign theory of human agency, Douglass's life and work help us see how individual initiative and social factors interact in the constitution of agency. This nuanced view gives us reason to value forms of activism that target both aspects of agency and to welcome the plurality of political resistance. It helps us avoid the purported divide between structure and agency that is so prevalent in contemporary public debates about racial justice. This divide perpetuates partisan conflict to paralyzing effect and does little to advance understanding or foster freedom. Let us be inspired instead by Douglass and by the nonsovereign conception of human agency and the nonsovereign vision of freedom he defended. Let us learn from his understanding, let us share his hope, and let us take up the initiative he began, that we might help bring it—finally—to fruition.

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ary 14, 2005): 1–3, <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5401a1.htm>. See also Eileen Crimmins and Yasuhiko Saito, "Trends in Healthy Life Expectancy in the United States, 1970–1990: Gender, Racial, and Educational Differences," *Social Science and Medicine* 52, no. 11 (June 2001): 1629–41; L. A. Clayton and W. M. Byrd, "Race: A Major Health Status and Outcome Variable 1980–1999," supplement, *Journal of the National Medical Association* 93, no. 3 (March 2001): 35S–354S; David R. Williams and Chiquita Collins, "US Socioeconomic and Racial Differences in Health: Patterns and Explanations," *Annual Review of Sociology* 21 (August 1995): 349–86; and Steven H. Woolf, Robert E. Johnson, and H. Jack Geiger, "The Rising Prevalence of Severe Poverty in America: A Growing Threat to Public Health," *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 31, no. 4 (October 2006): 332–41.

<sup>94</sup> This paragraph draws from Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 1. On elevated rates of black infant mortality, see "Infant Mortality Rate Disparity: Black vs. White in Maryland," Kids Count Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d. (but data provided here 2007–17), <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/4514-infant-mortality-rate-disparity%E2%80%94black-vs-white?loc=22#detailed/2/any/false/1652,1564,1491,1443,1218,1049,995,932,757/any/10323>.

## 6: Alexander Crummell's Three Visions of Black Nationalism

Frank M. Kirkland

### 1.

It is commonplace to regard Alexander Crummell as one of the initial proponents of “black nationalism” in its classic and rather seamless form. According to the doyen of scholarship on black nationalism generally and on Crummell particularly, Wilson J. Moses, Crummell “became an unmitigated villain from the perspective of 20th century liberalism” for being neither democratic nor multicultural nor adequately feminist.<sup>1</sup> But Crummell’s “villainy” may not stem from his alleged antidemocratic, antimulticultural, or improperly framed feminist stances. It may rather be due to his favorable adoption of nationalism over two other political-theoretical frameworks—liberalism and socialism. These three have been individually meaningful but, among themselves, strongly contested frameworks of modern political life over the past two and a half centuries.

Briefly and without nuance, liberalism gives paramount worth to individual liberty for the state to ensure formal equality and justice in principle for the pursuit of individual happiness. Socialism recognizes the significance of struggles around class interests and labor’s emancipatory potential, and charges the state with ensuring widespread satisfactory material conditions and outcomes for the sake of reaching social justice and equality collectively. But nationalism emphasizes a people’s own self-determining demand for the emergence, maintenance, and independence of their own “nation-state” for upholding social equality, justice, and a people’s collective identity. Its desirability and durability are sustained by those who believe (a) that their own distinctive political and cultural expression is harmed either by intrusively alien norms or by foreclosure to their own territory for such expression and (b) that individual liberty or class struggles cannot repair the aforementioned harms and create social equality and justice without the desideratum of their own nation-state shaped by their own norms and marks of identity. In effect, this constitutes nationalism in its classic form.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wilson J. Moses, *Creative Conflict in African American Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7. Hereafter cited as *Creative Conflict*. See also his book *Alexander Crummell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.) Hereafter cited as *Crummell*.

<sup>2</sup> For excellent, albeit different, critiques of this classic form and its manifold variants, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), and Omar Dahbour, *Illusions of the Peoples: A Critique of National Self-Determination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).

This form brings to light “black nationalism” as part of the extension, so to speak, of “nationalism” generally. Under this form, black people, then, have usually been collectively identified in terms of a long-standing distinctiveness and purity of its ancestry as a racial population, on which the fulfillment of its cultural and political aspirations, through the control and defense of its nation-state’s jurisdiction, is conserved. However, this form changes when Crummell brings his sacerdotalism,<sup>3</sup> initially in its politically theocentric and eventually in its politically theological appearance, to the idea of black nationalism. As we know, different faith traditions, such as Islam, were indeed put into the mix with that idea. But Crummell’s own Christian liturgical views and the idea of black nationalism, laced together, (a) modified each other over time while (b) keeping the stringency of his sacerdotalism foremost throughout. As a consequence, the idea of black nationalism should not be conceived as seamless in his thought. His political theology remains throughout, but his political theocentrism dissipates, despite the alterations the idea of black nationalism undergoes in his considerations.

Before 1852, Crummell never entertained the desideratum of an African-based nation-state, but he was attending to the conception of a political self-identity among black people sustained through his political theocentrism. Between 1853 and 1873, Crummell endorsed the desideratum of achieving an African-based nation state to engender a political self-identity among blacks sustained through his political theology. However, by 1873 Crummell had surrendered the desideratum of achieving a black or African-based nation-state. Yet he still endorsed the idea of black nationalism to his death in 1898, but now in terms of an efficacious citizenship in the United States sustained through his political theology. Furthermore the political self-identity of black people was, for Crummell, never framed in terms of black people as self-determining agents but as black people capable of imitating the manners, mores, customs, or habits of a politically theological Anglophone “civilization.” Yet he still embraced the idea of black nationalism. Explicating these three different considerations of the idea of black nationalism in Crummell’s thought shall be the primary focus of this essay.

Recent accounts have found fault generally with the idea of black nationalism as a cultural or political stance preserving a “racial essence,” an “essentialized” black (or racial) identity, for perennially delimiting the cultural and political solidarity of black people.<sup>4</sup> A “racial essence” would be the metaphysically “inner, integral substance” of a group—that is, what is ontologically persistent to it. It would not be what is provisionally settled, like habits and customs, in historical fashion to a group. It is supposedly obtained by “discovering” such substance or morphology through the false and pseudo-premises and methods previously

3 “Sacerdotalism” refers to the orientation and practices of a priest—in short, priestcraft—to be brought to bear on liturgical and extraliturgical matters.

4 For poignant discussions of this point, despite their differences, see Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), and Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).



credited to a natural science (biology) or naturalized determination, for the sake of identifying and charting a group's substance via "outer accidental features." "Discovering" such a racial substrate forecloses any interpretation of a group's actions as historically expressive of it and its members.<sup>5</sup>

Crummell endorsed the idea of black nationalism without ever committing to such an "essence" or to a science claiming to discover such an "essence." He did not attempt to correlate the supposed "inner" morphology or essential character of black people in general to that which was necessarily and sufficiently conveyed in their "outer" observable traits and behavior. But he did attempt to establish a political self-identity for oppressed and/or enslaved people on the basis of the required standing yet divinely inspired obligations from which a set of duties for life would be derived. A divinely inspired political self-identity was to remove the consequential moral ignorance arising from enslavement. This point gave Crummell the initial political theocentrism that framed his early formulation of black nationalism, a matter to be discussed below.

Along with the explanation and justification of Crummell's three versions of the idea of black nationalism, this essay addresses the following questions. (1) Why did Crummell initially believe that black nationalism could be underwritten by his political theocentrism and later believe it was underwritten by his political theology? (2) Why is racial essentialism neither important to nor affirmed by Crummell's idea of black nationalism? (3) Why did Crummell believe black nationalism remained cogent and intact as a notion even if the desideratum of a black nation-state was initially absent from and (later) ultimately dropped in his thought? (4) Why did the idea of self-determination become for Crummell ancillary, if not irrelevant, to the "civilizing" tendencies of black nationalism? (5) Why did Crummell embrace (black) nationalism over liberalism or socialism? (6) Why are Tommie Shelby's and Eddie Glaude's recent criticisms of the idea of black nationalism off the mark in relation to Crummell's third and settled version thereof?

## 2.

As Wilson J. Moses acknowledges, Alexander Crummell was born in 1819 in New York City as a "free African"<sup>6</sup>—a person of black African descent born and raised outside of plantation slavery by a married couple of "free Africans." His mother, Charity Hicks Crummell, was born in Long Island and also outside of the "peculiar institution," thereby "free." On the other hand, his father, Boston Crummell,

<sup>5</sup> Normally the racial essence or substance refers, say, to the consanguinity of blood or size of skull, supposedly borne in a group's skin color and quality of intelligence, in order to classify or rank a group within the human species. The group then is not characterized by actions explaining culturally, historically, and/or psychologically what is significant to it, but by what the "racial essence or morphology" is predisposed to transmit about it.

<sup>6</sup> Moses, *Creative Conflict*, 84.

was born in the kingdom of Timanee (now Sierra Leone) and was a victim of kidnapping in his homeland for the purpose of the Atlantic slave trade. Although the details of both the kidnapping and the emancipation of Crummell's father are unknown, the account of how he, together with his wife, raised Alexander is without dispute. Serious, laconic, provident, cultivated, impassive, college-educated, and educated from youth on matters African are some of the words used to describe his upbringing.

Religion was central to his upbringing and contributed to his long-standing friendship and association with Henry Highland Garnet, usually considered a forerunner of black nationalism. Both took religion as that wherein human life is thoroughly governed, as that which establishes and heeds at all times, through symbolic narratives and rituals, a communal or solidary obligation to what is taken as divine, sacred, or ultimately of intrinsic value to human life, actions, and beliefs. We would not be off base if we were to characterize them generally as participants in a political theology,<sup>7</sup> first advanced within African American political theory by David Walker in his *Appeal* and Maria Stewart in her "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," although they were not engaged in it as an academic discipline. For all of them, when the political domain deems it permissible, if not essential, for enslavement to flourish, a politically emancipatory response must necessarily be religiously based, since the political domain is preventing black people from freely fulfilling political obligations in the secular world. Divinely sanctioned obligation to the ultimate meaning of life became a significant element in the quest of enslaved, formerly enslaved, and "free" Africans of a political self-identity they might embrace in freedom.

From Crummell, then, a "black" identity then would not be a metaphysical or scientific designation of a racial morphology<sup>8</sup> but ought to be prefigured in a community or solidary group aligned with life's ultimate meaning revealed by Christianity. In a political theology, enslaved, formerly enslaved, and even free Africans would understand themselves to be acting out of a sense of who they are in a solidary way as an outcome of their political self-identity's connection to life's ultimate meaning. But adjacent to Crummell's political theology was initially a politically theocentric viewpoint as well,<sup>9</sup> which distinguishes him from Walker and Garnet and likens him to Stewart.

7 Melvin Rogers's work on David Walker inspires my emphasis on political theology. See his "David Walker and the Power of the Appeal," *Political Theory* 43, no. 2 (2015): 208–233. See also his "Living an Anti-Slavery Life: Walker on the Demandingness of Freedom" (unpublished).

8 In my earlier work on Crummell, I succumbed to regarding his position along this metaphysical line. See Frank M. Kirkland, "Modernity and Intellectual in Black," in *African American Perspectives and Philosophical Traditions*, ed. J. Pittman (New York: Routledge, 1997), 140–45.

9 For the sake of clarification, "political theocentrism" refers to the idea that obligations must needs be of divine sanction or authority, separable from and irreconcilable with secular political authority. "Political theology" refers to the idea that obligations to secular political authority have a religious or theological basis.

Enslaved, formerly enslaved, and “free” Africans would understand that who they are is not the outcome of some essential, invariant racial predisposition. Rather they would understand that who they are racially should be the outcome of saturating their actions with a religiously structured political self-identity aimed at life’s ultimate meaning. Political life was to be articulated and justified in terms of divine commands. Walker, Stewart, and Garnet would share this position, but in a way which Crummell generally would not.<sup>10</sup>

Walker, Stewart, and Garnet believed that satisfying this political-theological pursuit should entail violent resistance, the willingness to risk life to physical death, if nonviolent practice brought political opposition and confrontation. This would involve for them the belief that blacks’ solidary commitments to this political-theological pursuit were to be conducted necessarily for the sake of their political self-identity in attempts to abolish slavery and thereby gain access to the political domain. Satisfaction of life’s ultimate meaning and consequent acquisition of political self-identity should involve resistance and, if need be, death. Exiting enslavement and entering political freedom in the secular world were matters for which to die. Walker, Stewart, and Garnet linked an enslaved person’s character to a strength of conviction rather than to a willingness to submit. They never claimed that risking physical death involved blacks’ detached and dispassionate indifference to slavery and coercion for the sake of a divinely inspired political self-identity.

On these matters of violent resistance and risking life, Crummell’s thinking was different. For him, the political self-identity of blacks was to be achieved in the initiation and maintenance of blacks’ solidary obligations to life’s ultimate meaning separate from slavery’s abolition and expected subsequent entry into secular political life. Their position required blacks to stake their political self-identity to obligations concerning life’s ultimate meaning regardless of, but not indifferent to, the likelihood of the success or failure of abolition and secular political entry. Abolition and entry into secular political life could not provide obligations worthy for blacks to acknowledge and fulfill without a political self-identity independent of, not dependent on, them. Only obligations focused on life’s ultimate meaning would have the politically theocentric bent worthy of blacks, calling them to acknowledge their covenant with the divine, their suffering in fellowship with Christ, as sufficient for their political self-identity.<sup>11</sup> It was not necessary to satisfy those obligations in ways politically realizable in this world.

Crummell, like Walker, Stewart, and Garnet, neither advanced nor conceded

<sup>10</sup> In Crummell’s case, “the elevation and civilization of the negro appear to me determined purposes of the Divine Mind for the future.” See his “Address to the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society,” in *Destiny and Race: Selected Writings of Alexander Crummell, 1840–1898*, ed. W. J. Moses (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 163. Hereafter cited as “Address.”

<sup>11</sup> See Eddie Glaude Jr.’s *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.)

stoic indifference to abolition and secular political life. But violent resistance did not have for Crummell's discussion even conditional significance, as it did in Walker's, Stewart's or Garnet's, for blacks to fulfill solidary obligations to life's ultimate meaning in this world. What would have unconditional significance in their discussions was blacks' fulfilling such obligations through educational self-improvement to inoculate against moral ignorance and to convert their experience under the "invisible institution"<sup>12</sup> wherein those obligations would be "spiritually" met. Fulfilling such solidary obligations to life's ultimate meaning would be for blacks the fulcrum on which belief in their human dignity would be fostered and promoted. Exiting from non- or prepolitical condition in enslavement did not require risking physical life in violent resistance but revitalizing "spiritual" life in that "institution." Rather than accommodation to enslavement, this was a restoration of solidary obligation to life's ultimate meaning, an "acting dutifully in common," not within any secular political jurisdiction but construed only within a Christian-guided "invisible institution," by which blacks would discover their divinely inspired political self-identity. This point further distinguished Crummell from Walker, Garnet, and Stewart.<sup>13</sup>

But Crummell's political theocentrism was not consistent throughout his life and thought. He did surrender it for a political theology with which to, to grasp and fulfill the idea of black nationalism. In effect, he changed lanes. He would change lanes once more later in his life. As I shall argue below, Crummell made three "lane changes" in the way black nationalism would be understood and reached. This means that his idea of black nationalism was not seamless and uniform as most suppose and that so-called racial essentialism was not in the mix of any of these three "lane changes." These changings of lanes, so to speak, in Crummell's thought require explanation.

### 3.

At the beginning of his 1861 speech "The Progress and Prospects of the Republic of Liberia," Crummell asserts the following. "When I went to Liberia my views and purposes were almost entirely missionary in their character, and very much

12 See Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.) As is well known, "invisible institution" refers to the necessarily concealed and covert informal religious space for the "evangelization and conversion" of enslaved Africans to Christianity.

13 For Crummell, this does not mean that religion in the "invisible institution" could not be a motivating factor in violent resistance of blacks against enslavement. It was and did foster "acting polemically in resistance" against slaveholding political jurisdictions. But it signifies that such religion would be a motivating factor in all other sorts of solidary obligations, reflective of blacks' "acting dutifully in common" (not acting polemically in piety), despite the divergence of a Christian-oriented slave religion and Christian-oriented slaveholding political jurisdictions, as long as life's ultimate meaning was served.

alien from anything civil or national; but I had not been in the country three days . . . when all my governmental indifference at once vanished; aspirations after citizenship and nationality rose in my bosom . . . and thus [I became] a citizen of Liberia.”<sup>14</sup> His claim generates two questions: (1) how it fits with his initial political theocentrism and eventual political theology and (2) what differences there were among his views expressed in the (a) pre-Liberia period, (b) the Liberia period, from 1853 to 1872, and (c) the post-Liberia return to the US in 1873 to his death in 1898?<sup>15</sup>

Crummell’s pre-Liberia views, as sketched above, represent his first version of black nationalism. His first version links his political theocentrism to the American abolition of enslavement. Indeed his political theocentrism fits with the morally sentimentalist stance calling for slavery’s immediate abolition.<sup>16</sup> But where it breaks from that stance is its affirmation of blacks’ need to work from a divinely inspired shared identity of their own and an elimination of moral ignorance subsequent to, if not in conjunction with, slavery’s abolition. Most abolitionists from a moral sentimentalist position also viewed the end of enslavement as divinely inspired. But they neither viewed nor affirmed that sacred inspiration ought to bind blacks to “improve and elevate their character,” to form a shared identity of their own with the hope of freely engaging in pursuits with ultimate meaning. Indeed Crummell believed that blacks’ character and its improvement required more than slavery’s immediate abolition.

Slavery’s immediate abolition could not and did not remove the stigma of caste and coerced moral ignorance. Furthermore it might be indifferent to their removal. Hence black people’s internalization of both caste and coerced moral ignorance would have to be eliminated for the sake of revitalizing and improving their character and providing a religious framework that had been foreclosed to blacks in the secular world. Crummell’s political theocentrism is responsive to this negative side of slavery’s abolition. That elimination, however, would not automatically lead to blacks’ gaining a conception of morality and autonomy. Rather it would lead minimally to instilling insight in blacks to recognize what relevant features of circumstance and action ought to bind them morally.<sup>17</sup>

It should be noted that the moral ignorance against which Crummell speaks

14 Alexander Crummell, “The Progress and Prospects of the Republic of Liberia” in *Destiny and Race*, 165–66. Hereafter cited as “Progress and Prospects.” My addition.

15 In an autobiographical context, Crummell addresses these matters (points 1 and 2a–c) in his 1894 retirement sermon as pastor from St. Luke’s Church in Washington, DC, “Jubilate: The Shades and Lights of a Fifty Years’ Ministry,” in *Destiny and Race*, 31–44.

16 This stance contends that moral benevolence is a divinely inspired motivational sentiment, belonging to human nature, which is both the source of and incentive for slavery’s abolition. It cannot, however, contend that slavery’s abolition is necessarily morally right.

17 Alexander Crummell, “The Social Principle among a People” (1875), in *Civilization and Black Progress: Selected Writings of Alexander Crummell on the South*, ed. J. R. Oldfield (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 39.

is not that which is currently in vogue in scholarly circles examining concepts of racial and gendered “epistemic injustice.” Crummell treats such ignorance as plaguing blacks as a consequence of enslavement and caste, which dampens the impetus to resist and struggle against them, stifles blacks’ intellectual capacities about them, and fosters the denigrating motive to further comply with them. On the other hand, current scholars on gender and race would regard such ignorance as generally plaguing whites, as a motive for providing reasons either to foreclose, through a variety of strategies, gendered and/or racial advancement in social action and knowledge, or to dampen, again through a variety of strategies, the impetus to see those kinds of advancements in social action and knowledge continue.<sup>18</sup> Enlightenment from and struggle against this scholarly construed ignorance would be regarded as appropriate responses to it, correcting for the influence of prejudice in testimony and in interpretation for the sake of truth and justice.

In this pre-Liberian or first version of his black nationalism, Crummell does not believe that enlightenment or expansion of deliberative capacities would eliminate blacks’ moral ignorance or caste-shaped orientation. Shaping their obligations toward life’s ultimate meaning, however, would. Heeding obligations divinely authorized, Crummell believed, vanquishes the moral ignorance of enslaved and formerly enslaved Africans.<sup>19</sup> Here his political theocentrism rests. Correcting for the influence of bias would not be the goal. Rather converting one’s solitary obligations and orientation toward life’s ultimate meaning for the sake of divine sanction shaping collective purpose would be. Consequently Crummell would “extend to blacks the means of improvement [and] allow them full opportunity for the development of their capacities [via the instruction and the instilling of good moral and religious principles in them], and oppression could not withstand the influence and the power thereof.”<sup>20</sup> Why does Crummell take this direction?

Crummell is seeking in his first version a theocentric backdrop, compelling the belief that the sharable political self-identity and activity of black people are ethically purposeful and should be normatively routine. This backdrop would be Christianity, forming a reliably ethical-religious context, Crummell believes, to bind blacks through divine sanction and to accept life’s ultimate meaning. These would enable blacks to regard their political self-identity and actions as having a purpose and as being of value and worth regardless of their rejection in the secular

18 Representative accounts of the current type of “moral ignorance” would be Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Charles Mills, “White Ignorance,” and other essays in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

19 Alexander Crummell, “No Man Cared for My Soul” (1848), in *Destiny and Race*, 150.

20 Alexander Crummell, “An Address to the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (1851),” in *Destiny and Race*, 159. Additions derived from Crummell’s prior sentence in “An Address.”

political domain. If this is the case, Crummell's first version of black nationalism promotes the racial identity of black people in terms of an ethical-religious obligation to their political self-identity, values, and purposes nested in Christianity operative in the "invisible institution."<sup>21</sup>

For example, an enslaved African believes she has obligations to care for the well-being of her child. But her obligations for that care find no reliable support secured by or nested objectively within the broader and stable purpose of the notion of the family in slaveholding political jurisdictions. Racism and enslavement foreclosed, in Crummell's mind, the possibility of finding such reliability in political jurisdictions alone, even republican ones, to support enslaved Africans having such obligations as well as beliefs in having them. They fueled skeptical and malignant stances that "reached all the way down" in their denial of and violence against any justification and worthiness of black people's obligations, shared identity, interests, and actions even as matters that could hold by default.

Crummell would not be claiming that black people are incapable of grasping the holism of institutional political life for their identity and actions to possess an ethical imprimatur. He was rather claiming that they are prevented from gaining an ethical foothold in such institutions, from having their obligations nest within socially stable and politically protected conventions such as the family. Consequently black people would be alienated not just from any kind of shared identity, interests, and actions, but indeed from any substantial and purposeful basis by which they could be obligated to them, as if they "were under a curse."<sup>22</sup>

This is why it was important to Crummell for blacks to have connection with life's ultimate meaning. To make this more poignant, allow me briefly to compare Crummell's position with that of the antebellum post-1850 Frederick Douglass on this point. Douglass too challenged directly these malignant and skeptical stances against black people, as well as the contradictions and hypocrisies festering under and fostered by the American slaveholding jurisdiction, with his antislavery interpretation of their Constitution. Crummell, on the other hand, challenged them by endorsing "external" obligations rooted in Christianity to establish a justification for a divinely inspired political self-identity of black people immediately by default. For the antebellum post-1850 Douglass, the political self-identity of black people would be an outcome of the alteration in the understanding of the American political jurisdiction's own Constitution.<sup>23</sup> For the pre-Liberia Crum-

21 Be mindful that Crummell would demand that Christianity saturate the "invisible institution." He would not be amenable to what he would regard as "heathen" elements that could and would permeate that "institution." Crummell's aversion to these so-called heathen elements would remain with him his entire adult life.

22 Alexander Crummell, "The Negro Race Not under a Curse" (1850), in *Future of Africa* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1862), 327–54.

23 See Frank M. Kirkland, "Is an Existential Reading of the Fight with Covey Sufficient to Explain Frederick Douglass's Critique of Slavery?," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 3, no. 1, (2015): 132–38.

mell, the political self-identity of black people would be automatically held and presumed as a matter of divine inspiration.

No reference to citizenship or to a political nation-state is made desiderata in this version. But in Crummell's mind there is not a single political jurisdiction willing to accommodate the political membership of enslaved and formerly enslaved Africans. The political self-identity of black people necessary for actions in common is to be both presumed and sustained normatively solely by and in the service of Christianity. Christianity ought always to instill and support, through its work in the "invisible institution," the collective capacity of black people to withstand moral ignorance and act ever in solidary ways with ultimate meaning in mind. In Crummell's mind this does not foreclose extending a conception of nationalism to the solidarity achieved among enslaved and formerly enslaved Africans under Christian auspices. A nation may be without a state, but it need never without a Christian arena wherein solidary commitments "overstep the grave."<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Crummell believed black people could become "civilized" by opening and allowing their character to improve and develop on the grounds that their actions should be divinely obligated to life's ultimate meaning. This matter of "civilization" would play a major role in Crummell's thought but was altered in the three varying ways he addressed the idea of black nationalism. In any case, there are a few central themes that emerge from Crummell's take on civilization. First, Christianity serves the most important element of a cultural form of life, defining exemplary identities and solidarities by divinely required standards of obedience. Second, however, it should never be geared institutionally merely to ministering to the sanctity and dispensing the grace of individuals while excluding black people, individually and collectively, from congregations. Third, it should neither be politically complicit with the aims of slaveholding society nor subsidize life's ultimate meaning through secular political activity. This first version of the idea of black nationalism has a political-theocentric basis, which is its impetus for Crummell.

Crummell, however, never received Christian clerical endorsement of his call for a Christian-inspired, politically theocentric public identity for black people to embark on collective activity for their spiritual and ethical well-being. As we know, his efforts to obtain such support were consistently thwarted by clerical authorities in the United States. And that situation, as well as poor health, engendered his departure to England. Yet his stint in England led not only to a modicum of recuperation from ill-health as well as to a Cambridge education but, more importantly, to the opportunity for Crummell to fulfill his religious vocation on the continent of Africa, specifically Liberia. As he stated, he did not originally go to Liberia intending to connect the political and social affairs of Liberia to the political-theocentric mission discussed above.

24 Crummell, "No Man Cared for My Soul," 155.



## 4.

Crummell's arrival to Liberia initiated the second version of his idea of black nationalism. In this second version, his political theocentrism is dropped, a kind of politically secular citizenship is favored, a political nation-state is in the offing, and all these desiderata are in sync with a political theology. These points motivated Crummell's fierce political opposition to any agenda treating Liberia as a settler colony rather than as a nation-state. But, again, my focus is not the disposition and details of the realpolitik surrounding that agenda, against which Crummell fought, albeit unsuccessfully, during his twenty-year stay in Liberia. It is rather the shift in his intellectual account and endorsement of variations in the idea of black nationalism.

Crummell came to the position that citizenship in their own nation-state enabled black people to identify themselves as inalienable members of a political community. Solidary obligations in the Christian-oriented "invisible institution" were for Crummell no longer sufficient as means to enslaved, formerly enslaved, and "free" Africans' achievement of political self-identity. Emigration of formerly enslaved and "free" Africans to Liberia now becomes Crummell's focal point. But for him it is driven not by colonization but by civilization.<sup>25</sup> For Crummell (as well as Garnet), the repatriation of such Africans to Liberia, which would be attendant to their emigration, is not in the service of politically expedient ends indifferent to their acquisition of citizenship in that homeland. Rather it is in the service of ethical-religious civilization and their inalienable Liberian citizenship. Inalienability of Liberian citizenship would be concomitant with fidelity to life's ultimate meaning and highest regard to civilization. Liberians gained inalienable citizenship simply by belonging to a people as participants, not just in Liberia's civic and economic life but, more importantly, in its civic and economic life conducted in the light of life's ultimate meaning.<sup>26</sup> To bear the characterization "Liberian" was, in Crummell's mind, a distinction for black people because of the civilizational stature Liberia would have for them.

Crummell's first version of black nationalism entailed black people (as enslaved, formerly enslaved, or de facto free) in, but not of, a secular political jurisdiction. They could always nest their values, purposes, actions, interests, and identity to what should be a Christian-oriented "invisible institution" as the

25 See Alexander Crummell, "Emigration, an Aid to the Evangelization of Africa," and "The Regeneration of Africa," in *Africa and America* (Miami: Mnemosyne, 1969), 405–29 and 431–53. An emigration focused on civilization does have its set of problems, as shall be delineated below.

26 Crummell never mentions the following point—his position here bears some family resemblance to that part of the 1805 Constitution of Haiti, which affirmed all of its citizens as "black," including those who were racially white and nationally European other than French. However, in the Haitian case, political activity required neither connection to life's ultimate meaning nor divergence of white people's racialization from the inalienable citizenship of "blacks" as racialized. Rather it involved only convergence of white people's racialization with the inalienable citizenship of "blacks" as racialized.

enabling taken-for-granted context supporting what black people hope for and aspire to. In Crummell's second version of black nationalism, black people (formerly enslaved or de facto free) would nest their values in an extant Christian-oriented political jurisdiction wherein the inalienability of their citizenship is in line with the ethical-religious imprimatur of that political self-identity.

Crummell is proposing a specifically inalienable political citizenship—Liberian or citizen of Liberia—that entails an obligatory outlook on life's ultimate meaning within the nation-state. Political self-identity in this second version becomes a matter for a kind of political education wherein the formation of blacks as persons is wholly concurrent and congruent both with their obligation as civilized Christians and as citizens. This view, again, diverges from the first version of black nationalism, in which the notion of citizenship was never raised. Now blacks take on political self-identities as persons held accountable in a secular political jurisdiction and who advance in character only when they are both citizens and civilized Christians. Their identities as individual persons are subsumed in full under their inalienable membership as citizens, embracing life's ultimate meaning, in a jurisdictionally bound African nation-state. Crummell's second version is reliant on this juxtaposition, and it is important to keep this juxtaposition in mind, since a number of problems arise with it.

First, in the second version, it is not enough for the politics of the nation to be connected with life's ultimate meaning alone—that is, for the nation-state Liberia to serve only the purpose of encouraging black citizens to take political actions and form an identity related to life's ultimate meaning. Liberia not only must serve the fulfillment of the “spiritual” interests of black people politically acting concomitantly with life's ultimate meaning, even salvation, in mind. It must also serve to fulfill what we could call the “prudential” interests of black people individually acting in terms of their economic well-being, health, longevity, and protection. Crummell does not give any kind of systematic account of the nation-state institutionally “marrying,” let alone separating, these two sets of interests. He simply accepts the necessity of the fusion, denying in this version any necessary opposition between them, by virtue of black people's citizenship in the nation-state Liberia.<sup>27</sup>

But commerce, labor, and self-help, all of which go a long way in the satisfaction of prudential interests, derive their importance for Crummell from the decided influence of Christian-based standing purposes for the nation-state. They become outcomes of obligations worthy of imitation in and throughout other Christian nation-states, not obligations intrinsically important to a nation-state. The satisfaction of prudential interests can be and indeed are present in the formation of a nation-state and may prompt dutiful social action.<sup>28</sup> But by them-

27 See Alexander Crummell, “The Duty of a Rising Christian State,” in *Future of Africa*, 99–100. Hereafter cited as “Duty of Rising Xian State.”

28 “I recognize the need of Trade, Agriculture, Commerce, Art, Letters and Government as the collateral and indispensable aids to the complete restoration of my fatherland. . . . But they

selves they cannot prompt divinely authorized dutiful actions worthy of imitation, which would mark a nation-state as Christian and civilized.<sup>29</sup>

Left to their own devices, prudential interests place emphasis on an individual's concern for himself or herself, thereby possibly eroding, for Crummell, concern for the larger standing purposes of the nation-state. A black person's attachment to "spiritual" interests is supposed to be comprehensively connected to the attainment of her Liberian citizenship and the development of her civilized Christian character. Such a person, for Crummell, will have a conception of herself that does not allow her prudential interests to cloud, let alone impede, her actions in morally impermissible ways, since prudential interests are never prescribed within Christian-based standing purposes and are never allowed to "free float" or express an individual's whims.

As I stated above, Crummell is mindful of the advancement of the moral character of black people. But this advancement is too "externalist,"<sup>30</sup> quite detached from any connection to first-person stances of black people. Their character is measured by requirements to prevent the pull of both prudential interests and moral deliberation from becoming so strong that black people disregard, or even disavow, the reliance of their political self-identity as citizens on divinely authorized spiritual purposes. Their character must be independent of first-person assessment.

Crummell thinks that a proper political education instills an aptitude to embrace the obligation to and spiritual interests of Christianity, a function that should rise above prudential interests and even moral deliberation. Black people would then not feel any need to vacate or even bracket those Christian-based obligations and spiritual interests. They would bank on the ethical-religious context for those obligations and interests to take precedence ethically and politically over reasons emerging from their own deliberation or prudential interests. This context is now in and of the nation-state, not outside it. For Crummell, it enables "spiritual" standing purposes to have reliability, to be strongly "externalist," independent of deliberation or prudential interests.<sup>31</sup>

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are collateral and auxiliary, not the end and aim and object of that divine will which has been working out by means of institutions and governments." See Alexander Crummell, "Regeneration of Africa," 446.

29 "I call that a free system which acknowledges government an ordinance of God; which holds all human law as subject to the higher law of heaven; which regards a nation as a grand instrument for human blessedness and the divine honor." See Alexander Crummell, "The Responsibility of the First Fathers of a Country for Its Future Life and Character" (1863), in *Africa and America*, 140.

30 "Duty of Rising Xian State," 66. An externalist believes obligation or necessary rightness is dependent on sanction externally given to us for being moral. An internalist believes obligation or necessary rightness is reliant on our own rational motives to be moral without stipulation.

31 It would not be far-fetched to claim that, as a consequence, Crummell's first and second versions of black nationalism make very insignificant any normative role for first-person commitments among black people.

Second, in the second version, *civilization* becomes the term of art Crummell employs for the workings of the Christian nation-state, oriented toward life's ultimate meaning and toward educating its citizens in the development of moral character, law-abiding freedom, economic well-being, and international peace. Progress in these areas is a multigenerational ambition to be rendered worthy of only continuous imitation—that is, worthy of black people's uninterrupted commitment as citizens. If the nation-state is to show that progress, it must be oriented and obligated to civilization.<sup>32</sup> Indeed the progress of a nation-state could be defined in terms of victory in war, enslavement, colonialism, imperialism, and industrial oppression. For Crummell, they would be markers that keep a nation-state from being “civilized”—that is, from developing citizens' dedication to life's ultimate meaning. In short, Crummell is claiming that a nation-state should be attuned with and base its authority on Christian obligations.

But as his term of art, *civilization* creates a plethora of problems in Crummell's second version. Many have pointed out what they take to be contradictions in Crummell's thought when he fuses an apparently Anglophile-inspired conception of “civilization” and his conception of black nationalism. One certainly can understand the former conception without the latter and vice versa. But the problem is not that the two conceptions are contradictory. Rather the problem lies with the outcome of Crummell's conflation of “civilization” and British culture: it drives his idea of black nationalism toward political and cultural assimilation. In the context of Crummell's first version of black nationalism, “civilization” is simply the Christian worldview that ought to obligate black people to coordinate their beliefs and actions with the ultimate ends of life as they assert their shared solidary identity exclusively within the “invisible institution.” In the second version, “civilization” is the workings of Christian nation-state (a) exemplifying the general conduct (moral, cognitive, aesthetic, civic, and economic) of a citizenry and (b) promoting its mission in the political education of its citizens as Christians. “Civilization” in the second version, not the first, is to be measured in terms of manners and matters British.<sup>33</sup>

If anything, Crummell was grossly mistaken in conceiving of “civilization” as Anglo-inspired. Granting both his own politically theocentric and theological mission, “Christian” should have been the only way he characterized “civilization,” never “British,” in genesis and structure. What drove him to think that the mutual orientation of the politically obligatory with the divine would be reached in mat-

32 If the conduits for a nation-state to gain “perpetual peace,” economic well-being, and human development were war, industrial oppression, enslavement, colonialism, that nation-state for Crummell would not be civilized along specifically Christian (or, more broadly, politically theological) lines, despite success in obtaining them.

33 The move away from Great Britain as the measure of civilization is not based on British encumbrance to civilization, due to Great Britain's imperialistic ambitions/deeds and the eventual failures to maintain them, but to its lengthy and numerous attempts to obstruct having a measure for what counts as civilization at all.

ters British is found in the following two beliefs. The first was that the English language would be the best means of instilling political education in a nation-state's citizenry.<sup>34</sup> The second stemmed from his recognition that during ancient times Great Britain itself was a mere outpost of and subordinate to the Roman Empire, whose eventual defeat in Great Britain was concomitant with Great Britain's embrace of Christianity and step into civilization. Admittedly this narrative reveals more about Crummell's "romantic imaginary" than anything else. Be this as it may, Crummell's position has the desideratum of a nation-state in which black people obtain personhood<sup>35</sup> as citizenship through political education in line with an Anglophonic civilizational-cum-Christian mission, which he regarded as maintaining the importance of the connection between divinely sanctioned obligations and politics.

Crummell affirmed that Anglophonic civilization needed to be "engrafted" onto African peoples, since peoples of Africa were seen as "backward, benighted, unenlightened, degraded, offering little to the world"<sup>36</sup>—in short, the "moral ignorance" argument. But that argument is not proffered as a consequence of enslavement, expressed in the first version. Rather in the second version it is tendered as intrinsic to indigenous Africans. Hence there is a different presumption at work in Crummell's conception of "civilization" in his second version, which has a fourfold problematic impact, as noted above, on both the inalienability of Liberian citizenship and its pertinence to emigration.

First, moral ignorance is no longer an outcome of acquiescence to slavery's coercion. It is rather the outright heathenism of indigenous Liberians. Thus the inalienability of Liberian citizenship would be at the outset denied to native Liberians while extended to emigrant Africans of the diaspora on the grounds that native Liberians are not Christian and hence not civilized. Second, the inalienability of Liberian citizenship extended to emigrant Africans would be concomitant with their attunement to manners and matters British. Native Liberians would not bear witness to and not be oriented toward life's ultimate meaning, because Liberia's indigenously ethical/political institutions could not base their claim to authority on Christian "civilization" and attunement to British culture. Third, as a consequence, Liberia's indigenously ethical/political institutions could not have the legitimacy to serve as the reliably presumable (default) context for indigenous Liberians to be secure in obligations nested objectively within Liberia's political jurisdiction. They would have to be modified by emigrant Africans of the dias-

34 I cannot here go into detail on Crummell's philosophical views on the English language. For a fine and detailed interpretation of Crummell's treatment of language, see Stephen Thompson's essay "Crummell on the Metalogic of Non-standard Languages," in *Philosophia Africana* 10, no. 2 (2007): 77–106; see also his essay "Alexander Crummell" in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, June 6, 2011.

35 As part of his "inadequate feminism," Crummell himself would employ the term *manhood* and not mean by it "humanity" or the "human species."

36 Moses, *Crummell*, 132.

pora in the service of Christian and Anglo-inspired “civilization.” Fourth, Crummell’s difference between an emigration driven by civilization and one driven by colonization appears to be not a difference at all, given the issues raised above.<sup>37</sup>

During this “Liberian” period and in this second version, Crummell is unaware or ignorant of these problems, most likely because “color is nothing anywhere; civilized condition differences men all over the globe.”<sup>38</sup> “Civilization” becomes for him that which works to educate Liberians, emigrant and native, in a language, sustaining not only the divinely authorized obligations but the exchange of meanings as well. It provides the moral rules, prescribing Liberians’ obligations, given their divine authorization, and preserving the strictures of such obligations semantically through their political education and experience.

Keeping with Crummell’s “externalist” views, however, Liberians would be discouraged from taking first-person or “internalist” stances to evaluate their moral weight, since these moral rules have already been sanctioned and authorized by Christianity and in the political education of Liberians. The English language, then, would be the most denotative and connotative natural language available to Christian civilization for Liberia, according to Crummell, to designate Liberian citizens’ moral obligations, insulated from what Crummell regards as idiosyncrasies and contingencies. It is not superior to African languages and cultures due to its cultural and linguistic attractiveness. Rather, for Crummell, English is stronger than African and other non-English languages for denoting and representing immediately yet meaningfully the necessary enacting of obligation by Liberia’s citizenry.

Crummell sought to disassociate black nationalism from both liberalism and socialism. Attaching black nationalism to “civilization” as well as to ultimate meaning insulates and protects it from the perceived disruptions and disturbances that freedom via liberalism or via socialism would bring to a Liberian political order. The key issue here is not the expression of freedom or self-determination of emigrant and indigenous Liberian citizens, but their task of emulating the standards by which such freedom is gauged.<sup>39</sup>

Previously Crummell’s linkage of black nationalism to “civilization” opened a “spiritual” domain to which enslaved Africans ought to be obligated, since the secular political domain nullified obligations by which blacks could be identified as citizens. In the second version, that linkage is open to prudential expressions of freedom or self-determination coinciding totally with citizenship framed as civilized Christian political membership in a nation-state. Outside of such citi-

37 Admittedly Crummell believes the distinction can be maintained as long as the distinction between emigrants as an aggregate and as a congregation is kept. See his “The Regeneration of Africa,” op. cit., p. 440.

38 See Alexander Crummell, “Relations and Duties of Free Colored Men in America to Africa,” in *Future of Africa*, 250. Hereafter cited as “Relations and Duties.”

39 Although Omar Dahbour does not consider the idea of black nationalism in his work, it seems that expressions of freedom or individual liberty are “illusory” in it as well. See Dahbour, *Illusions of the Peoples*.

zenship, for Crummell, expressions of freedom or self-determination would be subject solely to prudential interests or undisciplined passions. Formal equality and freedom, safeguarding individuality (under the ideal of liberalism), or class struggles geared against economic exploitation, safeguarding solidarity and freedom through labor (under the ideal of socialism), could not insulate obligations from prudential interests and passions. Only a civilized Christian nationalism, for Crummell, would properly discipline expressions of freedom. "Civilization" makes freedom reliant on heeding obligations that are sanctioned divinely, not autonomously or prudentially.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, black people's education as citizens of their nation-state envelops their individually affective bonds with each other in a political community. Crummell does not affirm that one's judgment of oneself and of others' personhood may fall outside the goal of political education as citizens. The political education of black people, relevant to their citizenship, is regarded as both fully representative of and simultaneous with their social education for the good of each black individual's personhood. The private disposition of a black individual would be irrelevant, or at least ancillary, to defining her or his personhood.

But if this is the case, Crummell's second version may be reliant on criteria of identification, defining an individual's personhood sufficiently in terms of her citizenship in the political association, wherein she or he is "civilized" as Christian. Under such criteria, black folk would be regarded as "moving outward from," not "inward to," themselves, to direct themselves to others, to care for a larger good, to gain social standing from others by acknowledging their affective bonding in accord with their membership in shared political community. They would consider themselves exclusively, or at least primarily, as citizens of their own nation-state. Such a nation-state would be Christian, and it could be republican, but never liberal or socialist, in form. However, this second version too failed, theoretically and practically.<sup>41</sup> Crummell left Liberia exhausted and dejected, returning to the US in 1872.

## 5.

From 1872 onward, Crummell's position "changed lanes" once again. Admittedly this shift is usually not seen by others at all.<sup>42</sup> It is why most regard Crummell's idea of black nationalism as rather conceptually seamless from 1848, at the ear-

40 For a contrary consideration of these affairs, see the writings of Johann Baptist Metz.

41 Crummell identifies this problem as the failure in coordinating Liberian citizenship between formerly enslaved "free" Africans emigrating to Liberia and colonized Africans indigenous to Liberia. This failure looms large only in the second version. It partly contributes to Crummell's move away from his earlier conception of moral ignorance and an implicit move to acknowledging black "cultural difference," but with no allegiance to racial essentialism to cover over it.

42 Wilson does admit Crummell's "reconsideration" of African Americans' vocation during this period. See his *Crummell*, 196–221.

liest, to his death, in effect conflating his uniform and staunch advocacy and attempts to implement the idea with his theoretical justifications and formulations of it. There is, I believe, evidence to show the changing of lanes, and one piece of that evidence should give pause to those who believe otherwise: Liberia as no longer a desideratum for a black nation-state. This should not be seen as a contingent historical event but part of a necessary change to Crummell's prior accounts of his idea of black nationalism.

In a nutshell, Crummell's idea of black nationalism operated under two previous different versions. In the first, black people ought to share in a solidary political self-identity in a Christian-oriented "invisible institution," subscribing to obligations pertinent to life's ultimate meaning without bearing or undertaking any secular kind of citizenship. "Civilization" and its contents are outside of citizenship in the secular political domain. In the second, black people should be Liberians, citizens of and in their own nation-state, outside of American jurisdiction, as necessarily adjacent to their subscription to life's ultimate meaning. "Civilization" is concomitant with secular political citizenship in blacks' own nation-state. In the third version, Crummell regards blacks to be "civilized" individuals as a condition of effective citizenship of and in the United States. What relation does "civilization" have to the idea of black nationalism and effective citizenship here?

Even with emancipation from enslavement in the US and immediately thereafter legal transformation to citizens of the US, black people did not and could not effectively become actual US citizens. They were declared citizens of the United States. But within a decade or so thereafter, they were rendered ineffective as such: white "fellow" citizens had taken blacks' newly achieved political self-identity in the US as nugatory, if not illegitimate. The issue now, for Crummell, becomes not how black people are citizens or achieve citizenship in their own nation-state, but how their citizenship becomes effective in the United States. And efficacious US citizenship for black people has to be obtained, according to Crummell, through their social education, giving purchase to black people's individual personhood for entry into civilization and designating the importance of black individuality to it. Civilization is a prerequisite for effective citizenship.

This entails a shift to the third version in his idea of black nationalism. It is admittedly subtle and can be missed. But to my mind Crummell is aware, though perhaps not explicitly clear, about the necessity and the consequences of it when he had returned from Liberia. The ramifications of the third version involve alterations to his notions of "civilization," "moral ignorance," racially significant political self-identity, obligation, character, and political versus social education. It is when we ignore or neglect these that we interpret Crummell's idea of black nationalism as seamless from 1853. Thus reconstruction of that which is allegedly seamless is required in order to make the third version wholly transparent.

In "Social Principle," Crummell delineates what he calls two "heresies" inimical to African Americans. The first is the "dogma" that "colored people of this



country [USA] should forget, as soon as possible, that they ARE colored people," an impossibility for Crummell. The second is the "dogma" that "colored men should give up all distinctive effort, as colored men, in schools, churches, associations, and friendly societies"; for Crummell, this is a "submission to barbarism" and a call for colored people to "mix in with [their] fellow white citizens."<sup>43</sup>

Both dogmas rely on the continuance of the argument from moral ignorance, but affecting "free" African Americans subsequent to emancipation. To forget one is "colored" in the US is to be oblivious to the consequent "repulsion to color," when entering a saloon to the consequent "denial of a decent seat," when entering a railway car to the consequent dismissal to the "hole in the gallery" when entering the church of God, to the consequent "ignominious removal of a colored child from four-fifths of the common schools" when seeking to enroll her. Crummell's litany here is quite long.<sup>44</sup> Thus, given the first dogma and its consequences, why should African Americans, he would ask, heed the call of the second one? Only if kept morally ignorant, despite emancipation, can African Americans still bear the status of a "caste."<sup>45</sup>

Hence moral ignorance takes on another configuration. As we already know, in the first version, moral ignorance is an outcome of compliance with enslavement's denial of already extant solidary and obligatory commitments that Africans, enslaved and "free," could reliably presume to justify their thoughts and actions. In the second version, it is the heathenism pertinent to native, not emigrant, Liberians. But in the third it is, again, an outcome, but from African Americans' succumbing to the systematically distorted belief that race does not matter in American citizenship and in achievement.

Broadly speaking, Crummell made it important for blacks to maintain their solidary commitments in a civilizing relation to life's ultimate meaning in order to annul moral ignorance. However, if that proposal is to hold sway, then the above-mentioned configurations ought to be aligned with how each different way of "being civilized" dissolves each different form of moral ignorance in Crummell's three versions of the idea of black nationalism. In the first, "being civilized" allowed Africans, enslaved and "free," to reveal, not to have dispelled, their political self-identity as already shaped by divinely inspired solidary and obligatory commitments to life's ultimate meaning in a Christian-guided "invisible institution." It was intended to challenge, through a theocentric prism, the view that Africans did not have already-established obligations that bound them to "acting in common." In the second, "being civilized" enabled African-diasporic emigrants to subordinate, through political education, their individuality and personhood entirely under their political self-identity as citizens of the polity of Liberia as a

<sup>43</sup> "Social Principle" (1875), 35–36.

<sup>44</sup> "Social Principle" (1875), 35.

<sup>45</sup> "Social Principle" (1875), 37.

Christian-guided nation-state and thereby imitate or exemplify those of a civilized nation-state in manners and matters British. It was to dispel the view that the heathenism in Liberia would foreclose it to Christianity and civilization, so that African-diasporic emigrants could not carry out the civilizing mission, yet would keep it open to colonization.

But in the third, “being civilized” entails elements that are not involved in the two prior ways in countermanding moral ignorance. In “Excellence, an End of the Trained Intellect” (1884), Crummell contends that excellence is “that training by which intellectual forces are harmoniously developed, and reason and imagination are given their rightful authority,”<sup>46</sup> enabling African Americans individually “to strive to make the most of yourselves,”<sup>47</sup> not for vanity’s sake but out of responsibility for their individual selves. As he contends, “It is one of the highest accomplishments for men to know their own inward resources.”<sup>48</sup> Crummell does not want African Americans to cultivate such resources to mine continuously the idea and history of their enslavement or to foment vanity and self-display. Rather he wants them to cultivate said resources to develop character and free themselves from the false idea that race does not matter in American citizenship and in achievement, and from injurious habits related to that assumption.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, Crummell says, “being civilized” is at one with the development of character wherein “my mind to me a kingdom is”: with respect to intellect, “man himself is sovereign.” But matters of the intellect are always in the third version adjacent to Christianity; as Crummell puts it, “right-mindedness” is moral rectitude, “a grasp on one’s intellectual power giving facility and command in spheres of life.”<sup>50</sup> Thus “being civilized” necessitates the “production of letters, literature, science, philosophy, poetry, architecture, yea, all of the arts; and brings them with all their gifts, and lays them in the lap of [Christian] religion, as the essential condition of their vital permanence and their continuity.” “Being civilized” or “civilization” is the “primal need” of the race—all three versions of Crummell’s idea of black nationalism affirm this. But only in the third version is it introduced as a distinctive manner by which that “need” is to be fulfilled: the “work of intelligence” by African American individuals excelling in scholarship and thought.<sup>51</sup> Solidary commitments and obligations of African Americans are

46 Alexander Crummell, “Excellence, an End of the Trained Intellect” in *Civilization and Black Progress*, 116. It should be noted that this lecture is addressed to black women concerning the importance of “excellence” and a “trained intellect” to and for them.

47 Crummell, “Excellence, an End of the Trained Intellect,” 118.

48 Crummell, “Excellence, an End of the Trained Intellect,” 116 (my emphasis).

49 Alexander Crummell, “The Need of New Ideas and New Aims for a New Era” (1885), in *Civilization and Black Progress*, 120–33.

50 See his “Right-Mindedness” (1886), in *Civilization and Black Progress*, 144, 148–51.

51 See his “Civilization, the Primal Need of the Race” (1897) and “The Prime Need of the Negro Race” (1897), in *Civilization and Black Progress*, 198 and 202–3 respectively.

now to the cultivation of individual intelligence among themselves, recognizing it as in line with life's ultimate meaning, for the sake of the effectiveness of their citizenship and political self-identity within the United States.

There are a number of consequences to be drawn from this point. First, by rethinking what "being civilized" means in the third version, Crummell reconstructs the history of African Americans in terms of the need for a kind of education or training of the intellect which had been banned to them in and by the American nation-state to avoid ever incorporating them into it. Second, by virtue of his reconstruction, Crummell now views "being civilized" as more than total openness to divinely sanctioned obligations, demonstrating that Africans, enslaved and "free," already have a Christian-inspired ethical life in and through the "invisible institution." He views "being civilized" as a long, persistent struggle of Africans, enslaved and "free," against the American nation-state for the cultivation of intelligence and social education among them.<sup>52</sup> Finally, third, the emphasis Crummell places on the cultivation of the intellect mitigates the kind of political education enabling the sovereignty of the polity (Liberia) to underwrite the "sovereignty" of the individuality and personhood of each formerly enslaved, "free," or indigenous African. Allow me to explain this third point.

In Crummell's second version of the idea of black nationalism, the politically educational goal was African-diasporic emigrants' and (problematically) indigenous Liberians' citizenship committed to life's ultimate meaning in their own nation-state, full stop. Fidelity to one's social identity and person would completely converge with citizenship. Citizenship in such a nation-state would be purchased at the expense of individuality and personhood.<sup>53</sup> However, in his third version of that idea, there is the socially educational goal of black nationalism, which is to produce African Americans persons whose intellect and temperament are developed to be deliberative and distinctive in action and judgment, such that others sharing solidary commitments would see them as fit to serve effectively as citizens in the nation-state. The socially educational goal of personhood heralds, yet is still supported by, the politically educational goal of citizenship. Remember that in the second version, an African American's identity as a person wholly converges with her citizenship to the nation-state. In the third version, an

52 See his "Incidents of Hope for the Negro Race in America" (1895) and "The Attitude of the American Mind toward the Negro Intellect" (1897), in *Civilization and Black Progress*, 174–84 and 204–14 respectively.

53 This position makes "modernity in black" or "Afro-modernity" a thesis very inconsistent and problematic in Crummell's thought. For representative discussions of the thesis itself, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). See also Frank M. Kirkland, "Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black," and his "Modernisms in Black" in *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, ed. T. Lott and J. Pittman, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 67–86.

African American's citizenship is reliant on an individual's allegiance to her own person to determine whether, how, and why her citizenship is in harmony with that allegiance.

Crummell's third version supports the sovereignty of the polity underwriting the "sovereignty" of each individual's personhood and identity to recognize the collective aim of the polity as her own aim, but with a major difference. In recognizing the collective aims of the polity, an individual's action and identity require her own intellection and consent. An individual's personhood would not be dismissed when she is recognized as a citizen of her polity or nation-state, nor would it be wholly subsumed under or enveloped by that citizenship. Rather it would be realized as an individual develops herself as a civilized person through a social education, and her citizenship may not be had or diminished at the expense of that education. In the second version, the modern nation-state Liberia produced African-diasporic and indigenous Liberian people, both of whose identities were to be fully exhausted by their citizenship as civilized Christian Liberians. In the third version, however, the social education of African Americans produces individuals who, in the end, can incorporate the role of US citizen in a specific way that accords with their solidary commitments to life's ultimate meaning while achieving the goods and goals pertinent to being a civilized African American person through intelligence and accountability.

Hence Crummell attends to the socially educational uplift of African Americans. Such uplift was nonexistent in the first version and took a backseat in the second. Note that discussion of that uplift in the third version includes nary a word about a black nation-state, but speaks volumes regarding black people's lack of effective citizenship in the US and the need for a social education to overcome it. Crummell does not argue directly for their political education to achieve an effective citizenship in either their own nation-state in Africa or in the United States. Rather he is intensely supportive of their socially educational uplift to achieve personhood for each as a necessary mark of "civilization" and the nullification of moral ignorance. The credentials of effective citizenship become "noble thought, grand civility, chaste and elevating culture, refinement,"<sup>54</sup> and economic self-sufficiency. In effect, the third version emphasizes the need for social education, in which the goal is for any black individual's personhood to develop her intellect in order to constantly inform her citizenship and make it effective. The goal of their social education is both distinct from and yet in accord with an efficacious citizenship. Consistent with commitment to life's ultimate meaning, the aim is for African Americans to be intelligently responsive to a political world that continually and arbitrarily sets impediments to the choices it seeks to exact from them. The third version was the idea of black nationalism that Crummell espoused after 1872 and advocated until his death.

54 See "Civilization, the Primal Need of the Race," 198.

## 6.

Although their work has not extended to Crummell specifically, Tommie Shelby and Eddie Glaude have provided insightful and philosophically worthy reflections on the idea of black nationalism generally. But if I am moving in the right direction with Crummell, then he is either an anachronism or anomaly in or a bona fide yet neglected alternative to Shelby's and Glaude's types thereof. In Shelby's scheme, for example, Crummell would appear to abide by a "classical black nationalism" wherein "black solidarity and self-realization must be rooted in a shared African or Pan-African ethno-racial identity [for] black Americans [to] reclaim and develop . . . a necessary and proper foundation for a transnational and self-determining black community."<sup>55</sup> This "classical" form rested on a kind of "racial essentialism" or "metaphysics of race." In contrast, Shelby proposes and ultimately supports another type, a kind of "pragmatic black nationalism" wherein "black solidarity is merely a contingent strategy for creating greater freedom and social equality for blacks, a pragmatic yet principled approach to achieving racial justice."<sup>56</sup>

However, Crummell's concept of black nationalism would appear to fall outside both Shelby's "classical" and "pragmatic" forms. First, Crummell gives little, if any, purchase to the metaphysics of race, as I argued above, to justify solidary commitments among blacks. His appeal is to solidary commitments and obligations justified on a politically theological line. Second, "self-determination," collective or individual, plays no role in Crummell's idea of black nationalism. "Freedom" or "liberty" may do so, because it can be aligned with his "externalism" and he could defend them as reliant on divine sanction. "Self-determination" is reliant on one's capacity to act freely on a motive one gives to oneself, and normally such a motive is measured by the caliber of reason one finds worthy to give to oneself. Crummell, by contrast, gives weight to being imitative of civilizing manners and matters, not to being self-determining. But it also suggests that "self-determination" may not be a quality characteristic of the idea of black nationalism itself. What gives credence to the last point is, third, that the goal of black nationalism is not a pragmatically "contingent strategy for creating greater freedom and social equality for blacks" but rather an establishing of the normative propriety of blacks nullifying their moral ignorance.

This matter is a constant in all three versions of Crummell's idea. But it is revealed in the third version only as blacks nullifying such ignorance through their solidary commitments to life's ultimate meaning and to development of intellect through social education to produce an efficacious citizenship among blacks for the sake of amplifying freedom and social equality. Crummell has shifted the cri-

<sup>55</sup> See Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, 10.

terion of black nationalism. It would be, for him, not blacks' emigration from the US to their own nation-state<sup>57</sup> but their overcoming of their moral ignorance engendered by enslavement (first version), indigenously Liberian heathenism in the face of African-diasporic emigration (second version), and systematically distorting practices and views on African Americans as American citizens (third version).

Glaude has a take on black nationalism that differs from Shelby's.<sup>58</sup> Despite rightful criticism of the attachment of racial essentialism and even the black nation-state to "classical black nationalism," he can admit to a kind of "classical black nationalism" running along politically theological lines and embracing black individual personhood. This would put him somewhat in line with Crummell's third version. But for Glaude, as opposed to Crummell, this also would make black people's political self-identity and actions outcomes of their solitary commitments to normatively feasible stories and rituals, deeming whether their actions and political self-identity are worthy to be called "black nationalist" or not.<sup>59</sup> In effect, blacks' solitary commitments to life's ultimate meaning or to some normative framework are, for Glaude, neither ubiquitous nor incidental to the idea of black nationalism. But they receive merit by their viability for identifying actions and evaluating political self-identities as normative under certain circumstances.<sup>60</sup>

There is a fluidity and flexibility to Glaude's position that could never be found in Crummell's. Crummell himself is not intellectually clear-headed and not necessarily mindful of the shifts in his idea of black nationalism and the ramifications, wittingly or unwittingly, stemming from them. But what Glaude would refer to as "pragmatic" for a "black nationalism" would not be a "contingent strategy" or a "heuristic value" incidental to black people's political self-identity and actions, a position with which Crummell's idea of black nationalism, especially its third version, would not be in accord. Crummell would not be reliant on any form of pragmatism, because he would regard black nationalism as unreservedly obligatory, a moral end to be promoted of necessity, not as feasible.

Shelby and Glaude each hold their own interpretation in favor of the "pragmatic"—either instrumental/strategic (Shelby) or normatively feasible (Glaude)—alternative as the way the idea of black nationalism is best and should be construed. Shelby would argue that the "classical" form is in principle totally committed to racial essentialism; Glaude that it can, in certain settings, be committed to something normative. But they would concur that Crummell's idea of black nationalism falls under the "classical" form. Hence they each would need to have different reasons for so claiming. The unreservedly obligatory character

57 Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, 28. Shelby affirms this criterion as "consistent" with both "classical" and "pragmatic" black nationalism.

58 Glaude, *Exodus!*, 111–26.

59 Glaude, *Exodus!*, 55–56.

60 Glaude, *Exodus!*, 64–65, 125–26.

of Crummell's idea would appear, for Shelby, to pass as a commitment to racial essentialism; for Glaude it would appear as "wound too tight" or too normatively stringent to pass as "pragmatic" in able fashion.

Clearly Glaude operates with a sense of the "pragmatic" that is stronger and wider than that of Shelby's, but much more prudential than what Crummell himself would ever imagine, given his sacerdotal roots. It may be, however, that the "classical" versus "pragmatic" distinction is not a good way to construe Crummell's idea of black nationalism. Since neither Shelby nor Glaude specifically tracks the "lane changes" Crummell makes in holding the idea, locating it in reference to that distinction would be a matter of speculation on their parts. Crummell, I think, has offered another kind of distinction to examine the idea of black nationalism, consistent with the three versions: the distinction between a politically educational goal of citizenship for black nationalism primarily to secure identity with the nation-state and a socially educational goal of personhood for black nationalism in order to overcome black people's moral ignorance so that they may take principled political actions. As far as I know, only two other persons took up this third version of the idea, not just to follow Crummell but to expand on it.<sup>61</sup>

Crummell opened the door to an idea of black nationalism best understood in terms of the significance it gives to the development of African Americans' individual intellect and character for their solidary commitments to life's ultimate meaning. In that development, African Americans could overcome moral ignorance and give efficacy to their citizenship. For Crummell, embracing that idea did not foreclose coalitions with others to make citizenship effective. Rather it spoke to what African Americans, in their solidary commitments, should prioritize—that is, their social education—to undo racism-generated habits of democracy, to participate effectively in such coalitions for the sake of both democracy and life's ultimate meaning. This may be neither "classical" nor "pragmatic," but the idea's connection to this kind of social education makes it pertinent to our time as well.

<sup>61</sup> Although the matter cannot here be addressed, the two are Anna Julia Cooper and W. E. B. Du Bois.

## 7: Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Deception

Desmond Jagmohan

*Booker T. Washington was not an easy person to know. He was wary and silent. He never expressed himself frankly or clearly until he knew exactly to whom he was talking and just what their wishes and desires were.*

W. E. B. Du Bois<sup>1</sup>

*A book to be effective is very much like an address; if it is prepared for one audience and then delivered to another it becomes non-effective and non-interesting.*

Booker T. Washington<sup>2</sup>

There is a lot more to Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) than his accommodating clichés and compliant platitudes. Reviewing Washington’s 1901 autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, William Dean Howells, one of the era’s most acclaimed novelists and critics, observed: “What if upon some large scale they [black Southerners like Washington] should be subtler than we have supposed? What if their amiability should veil a sense of *our* absurdities, and there should be in our polite inferiors the potentiality of something like contempt for us? The notion is awful; but we may be sure that they will be too kind, too wise, ever to do more than let us guess at the truth, if it is the truth.”<sup>3</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois privately wrote that Washington had a well-disguised contempt for and lack of trust in white Americans, despite being beloved by many of them: “He had no faith in white people, not the slightest, and he was most popular among them.”<sup>4</sup> Like Howells and Du Bois, many of Washington’s contemporaries grew suspicious of his timid public statements, especially given his growing political influence and power.

In 1905 Thomas Dixon Jr., the author of *The Clansman*, the novel that inspired D. W. Griffith’s film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), warned that Washington con-

<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy of Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 243.

<sup>2</sup> “Letter to J. L. Nichols and Company, April 26, 1901,” in *The Booker T. Washington Papers* (hereafter *BTWP*), ed. Louis R. Harlan et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 6:96.

<sup>3</sup> William Dean Howells, “An Exemplary Citizen,” *North American Review* 173 (August 1901): 281–88.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901–1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 134.



cealed seditious aims behind his compliant public image and that Washington's university, the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, was a Trojan horse in the heart of the South:

The trouble with Mr. Booker T. Washington's work is that he is really silently preparing us for the future heaven of Amalgamation—or he is doing something equally dangerous, namely he is attempting to build a nation inside a nation of two hostile races. In this event he is storing dynamite beneath the pathway of our children—the end at last can only be in bloodshed. Mr. Washington is not training Negroes to take their place in any industrial system of the South in which the white man can direct or control him. He is not training his students to be servants and come at the beck and call of any man. He is training them all to be masters of men, to be independent, to own and operate their own industries, plant their own fields, buy and sell their own goods, and in every shape and form destroy the last vestige of dependence on the white man for anything.<sup>5</sup>

Dixon pressed Washington to prove that he did not harbor broader political aspirations for his race and that he was not secretly pursuing that goal through the Tuskegee Institute. “I hereby offer to contribute \$10,000 from the profits of ‘The Clansman’ to Tuskegee Institute, provided you give complete and satisfactory proof that you do not desire Social Equality for the Negro and that your School is opposed to the Amalgamation of the races,” Dixon wrote to Washington on January 22, 1906, after attending a public fundraiser for the university.<sup>6</sup> In his autobiography, Mark Twain, who knew Washington and was at the event, described Dixon's offer of what would amount to \$500,000 today and Washington's refusal to reply: “Just before Booker T. Washington entered the hall a messenger boy handed him a note from Thomas Dixon Jr., in which the writer said he would contribute \$10,000 to Tuskegee if Mr. Washington would state at the meeting that he did not desire social equality for the negro, and that Tuskegee was opposed to the amalgamation of the races. When asked what he had to say on the subject, Mr. Washington said: ‘I will make no answer whatsoever. I have nothing to say.’”<sup>7</sup>

Dixon, who continued to push Washington to admit that he had a hidden agenda, insisted that “the American people will demand that you face squarely sooner or later” that accusation.<sup>8</sup> Washington never responded to Dixon's provocations. Although he was a vicious racist, Dixon did see through Washington's mask, behind which lay seditious ambitions and a veiled yet subversive power.

5 Thomas Dixon Jr., “Booker T. Washington and the Negro: Some Dangerous Aspects of the Work of Tuskegee,” *Saturday Evening Post* [Philadelphia], August 19, 1905.

6 “Letter from Thomas Dixon Jr. to BTW, January 22, 1906,” in *BTWP*, 8:508.

7 Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 1:160.

8 “Letter from Thomas Dixon Jr. to BTW, January 23, 1906,” in *BTWP*, 8:508–9.

Northern white boosters of Tuskegee took Washington's moderation at face value. His emphasis on access to jobs and industrial education affirmed their faith in a capitalist market as the best means for resolving social conflict. In addition, Washington's proposals did not challenge their paternalist view that former slaves were not yet able to assume the responsibilities of citizenship and would need a long period of training and tutelage before they would be ready to fully take part in the free labor market.

Historians agree that Washington pursued a more ambitious politics than he ever publicly acknowledged. August Meier, who uncovered evidence of Washington's clandestine civil rights campaign and his backroom politics, argued that Washington had a far-reaching agenda.<sup>9</sup> Meier, however, concluded that at bottom Washington cared only for personal power and prestige.<sup>10</sup> Louis R. Harlan, who wrote the definitive biography of Washington, buttressed Meier's two-Washington thesis with an astonishing amount of evidence, but he too concluded that Washington had sacrificed his higher ideals on an altar of power.<sup>11</sup> Crucially, Harlan determined that "[Washington] was not an intellectual, but a man of action. Ideas he cared little for. Power was his game, and he used ideas simply as instruments to gain power."<sup>12</sup> According to this line of interpretation Washington used deception out of self-interest rather than as a means to advance the social and political goals of his people.<sup>13</sup>

In his recent revisionist account of Washington, Robert Norrell contends that

9 "Although overtly Washington minimized the importance of the franchise and civil rights," wrote Meier, "covertly he was deeply involved in political affairs and in efforts to prevent disenfranchisement and other forms of discrimination." Specifically, Washington was "secretly engaged in attacking the disenfranchisement constitutions by court action." August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 110-13.

10 Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 115. Raymond Smock agrees: "[Tuskegee] offered Washington the public mantle of a prominent educator while hiding his aggressive and sometimes ruthless actions as a political boss who operated on both sides of the color line." *Booker T. Washington: Black Leadership in the Age of Jim Crow* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 143.

11 Harlan diluted his unsurpassed archival research with armchair psychoanalysis: "The complexity of Booker T. Washington's personality had its origins in his being black in white America. He was forced from childhood to deceive, to simulate, to wear the mask." And Washington's "thirst for power and gift for manipulating others matured into a lasting pattern of life and mode of thought." Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), viii, 92.

12 Harlan, *Making of a Black Leader*, viii.

13 Harlan wrote: "Like most other historical figures, and particularly politicians, Washington can best be understood not by studying his presumed ideology, but by learning what he did." Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), ix. Imagine the implications such an assumption would have on the study of the history of American political thought. Are we to approach Jefferson or Lincoln in this way? This view holds that Washington's concern with power proves his lack of interest in ideas. Power is, of course, the central idea in study of politics. Nonetheless, this view writes Washington out of intellectual history.

fears of white “nationalist” violence explain Washington’s moderate public statements, but Norrell too assumes that Washington did not reflect on the theoretical and moral implications of his use of evasion, concealment, and deceit.<sup>14</sup> The literary scholar Houston Baker Jr. is alone in viewing Washington as a thinker, and an exceptional one at that. He argues that Washington’s authorial ambivalence in *Up from Slavery* enabled him to veil his critique of Jim Crow behind uplift platitudes.<sup>15</sup> Taking Baker’s assessment further, I believe that Washington’s veiling style is at the core of his politics.

In this chapter I argue that Washington was exceptionally skilled in navigating power, manipulating expectations, and redirecting racist forces and ideas toward his own ends. His goal was not to incite a revolution but to compromise in the here and now in order to achieve what he saw as the only way to reach the longer-term goal of overthrowing Jim Crow. He believed that defeating Jim Crow would require a lengthy siege, and the best way to prepare for it was to take practical steps to improve the economic and social conditions of black people. Those advances would enable them to withstand the cruelties of white supremacy while they were engaged in chipping away at its enormous edifice. Instead of instigating what he believed would be a vain struggle to achieve the good life for ex-slaves at that particular time and in that particular place, he sought a political route that would help them fare better. That way forward required the use of concealment and dishonesty, political necessities of the dispossessed and powerless.

It is true that Washington was insincere and inauthentic and that he often deceived his allies as well as his enemies, but I reject the view of him as merely a duplicitous politician lacking a moral core. Rather, I see him as a theorist of political deception, an opinion I arrived at by examining the context in which he operated and the constraints he faced. I begin with Washington’s pragmatic responses to his allies who criticized his equivocal public statements on Jim Crow. Second, I argue that not only did Washington defend ambivalence in his private correspondence with his colleagues but he also repeatedly, if obliquely, addressed the subject in his autobiographical writing, especially in his efforts to defend his 1895 Atlanta Address as a model of the sort of political conduct African Americans in the Jim Crow South ought to practice. Obviously, Washington could not explic-

<sup>14</sup> Washington’s “was an awful time that set narrow and unjust limits on what he could do to pursue his ends. In Washington’s view,” Norrell continues, “his life was not just a struggle up from slavery but also a great effort to rise above history,” or, we might say, context. Robert Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Baker argued that Washington directed stereotypes and appropriated racist imageries toward a “liberating manipulation of masks and a revolutionary renaming.” Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 15–22, 35–36. Later Baker withdrew this conclusion. He argued that Washington’s deceptive style was born of a desire for personal power and prestige. *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism / Re-reading Booker T.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). Baker credits Harlan’s biography for his reversal.

itly endorse deception and cunning if he wanted to retain the trust and goodwill of whites, but in his biography of Frederick Douglass he advocates for deception as normative behavior.

### Political Leadership under Persecution

Washington funded and organized legal challenges to Jim Crow, taking some cases all the way to the United States Supreme Court, but he never publicly championed that cause or his efforts to further it.<sup>16</sup> He consistently criticized Jim Crow legislation and social norms, but often in equivocal terms obscuring the moral convictions that underlay both his legal work and his furtive transactions with white legislators on behalf of better policy outcomes for African Americans in the South. As a result of his reticence, few of Washington's contemporaries knew of his legal work and commitment to equal citizenship. With African Americans in the South politically disenfranchised, there was no incentive for Republicans or Democrats at the local, state, and national level to propose, much less enact, laws advantageous to those citizens. This context, along with the socioeconomic restrictions of black life and the entrenchment of racism in the South poses the question: what should an African American leader do to achieve any progress? This was the impossible situation faced by Washington, whose justifications for his moderate, even compliant, public responses to race-based injustices are the subject of this section.

Many white southerners saw Washington as a threat, and some white liberals saw him as a coward. On April 4, 1913, Oswald Garrison Villard wrote to Washington, "I think your timidity is running away with you . . . you are too fearful."<sup>17</sup> Villard was a well-known journalist, philanthropist, and civil rights activist, and a grandson of the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Villard had worked closely with Washington in the 1890s and early 1900s, but he now aligned himself with more radical civil rights leaders like Du Bois. He even served as a founding member and the disbursing treasurer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Villard, who was most notable for his uncompromising integrationism, insisted that Washington be more bold and courageous in his public criticisms of Jim Crow. Washington's tone seemed to affirm the forces of white supremacy more than question them and therefore undermined his leadership of the race. "You must, of course, be your own judge of conditions in the South," Villard wrote, "but I cannot help saying to you how strongly I feel that in giving way to prejudice as much as you do . . . [you will surely] increase prejudice and weaken yourself."<sup>18</sup> Villard was adamant that honest, candid, and uncom-

16 Desmond Jagmohan, "Cities of Refuge: Booker T. Washington's Turn to the Courts," unpublished manuscript. This essay recovers Booker T. Washington's clandestine legal challenges to Jim Crow.

17 "Letter from Oswald Garrison Villard to BTW, April 4, 1913," in *BTWP*, 12:159–60.

18 "Letter from Oswald Garrison Villard to BTW, April 4, 1913," in *BTWP*, 12:159–60.

promising protest against the South was the only morally permissible and politically effective means for combating racial injustice.

Washington wrote back to Villard that he could live with the stain of cowardice if his prudence, in the end, increased socioeconomic opportunities for his people in the South and made their lives a little more bearable: "If it will do the cause any good I am willing to plead guilty to the charge of cowardice and timidity."<sup>19</sup> Washington did not remind Villard that even though his rhetoric was lower key than Garrison's and Douglass's, he had at times been very straightforward in his public criticisms of disenfranchisement, segregation, and lynching. He also did not defend himself by citing the limitations imposed on African American leaders in the Deep South.

In addition, Washington did not tell Villard that as the founder and president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he had little choice but to be restrained and judicious in his public criticisms of local and state politics and of southern whites in general. As one of only a few major African American universities located in the heart of the rural South, Tuskegee Institute and its faculty and students were highly vulnerable to the forces of white terrorism. Looked at under these circumstances, Washington's acquiescence and cautiousness can be seen as survival skills.

By the time of this 1913 exchange, Washington had already been facing criticism from Villard and other northerners for over a decade. In 1910 Villard had written to Washington: "Your philosophy is wrong."<sup>20</sup> Villard went on to assert that if his grandfather, the renowned abolitionist, had been as conciliatory as Washington, "he never would have accomplished what he did, and he would have hurt, not helped, the cause of freedom."<sup>21</sup> Villard shared the view of many African Americans and liberal whites that it was the abolitionists' defiant protest, their unfiltered criticism, and their unrelenting commitment to truth and justice that emancipated the slaves. Both of these camps believed that the antislavery tradition of defiant opposition was the way to challenge and overthrow Jim Crow. "It certainly cannot be unknown to you that a greater and greater percentage of the colored people are turning from you and becoming your opponents," Villard warned, "and with them a number of white people as well."<sup>22</sup> This letter went unanswered for nearly a month.

In January 1911, Washington finally responded: "You, of course, labor under the disadvantage of not knowing as much about the life of the Negro race as if you were a member of that race yourself."<sup>23</sup> Washington almost never resorted to ad hominem arguments, so Villard must have struck a nerve. Washington then

19 "Letter from BTW to Oswald Garrison Villard, April 8, 1913," in *BTWP*, 12:164–66.

20 "Letter from Oswald Garrison Villard to BTW, December 13, 1910," in *BTWP*, 10:506.

21 "Letter from Oswald Garrison Villard to BTW, December 13, 1910," in *BTWP*, 10:506.

22 "Letter from Oswald Garrison Villard to BTW, December 13, 1910," in *BTWP*, 10:506.

23 "Letter from BTW to Oswald Garrison Villard, January 10, 1911," in *BTWP*, 10:541.

presented evidence that he had always explicitly denounced white supremacy: "You say that I ought to speak out more strongly on public questions. I suppose that means such questions as relate to our receiving justice in the matter of public schools, lynchings, etc. In that regard, I quote you some sentences which I used only a few days ago in talking to the Southern white people here in Alabama concerning their duty toward the Negro."<sup>24</sup> A series of passages from newspaper and magazine articles and interviews followed, demonstrating Washington's unambiguous condemnation of segregation, disenfranchisement, lynching, defunding of education, and other injustices. These quotations were neither an exaggeration nor a fabrication; at times Washington genuinely and courageously denounced white supremacy. It is also true that in the South and its main newspapers, he carefully measured his words and tempered his criticisms.

Washington believed that African Americans in the South faced a new challenge, one that required a different set of tactics from the ones used by abolitionists. He was convinced that William Lloyd Garrison's strategy had little to teach contemporary African Americans about the nature of white supremacy and even less about how they should conduct themselves politically. As he wrote to Villard, "It seems to me that there is little parallel between conditions that your grandfather had to confront and those facing us now. Your grandfather faced a great evil, which was to be destroyed. Ours is a work of construction rather than a work of destruction."<sup>25</sup>

Washington reasoned that a politics relying largely on aggressively protesting Jim Crow would likely fail because of the complete economic, political, and ideological entrenchment of white supremacy. Pleas for justice would fall on deaf ears. Candid and fearless speech was essential to challenging white supremacy, he wrote, but it had its limits: "The condemnation of wrong should always have a very large and important place; the demands for rights withheld should have a large and important place; but a very large place in all of our discussion and in all of our efforts should be given to something that is constructive. Now, some of us live in the section of the country where we hear of these wrongs. We eat them for our breakfast, for our dinner, for our supper."<sup>26</sup> Protest strategies in the North should, he argued, supplement the organized, though less confrontational, resistance carried out by Afro-southerners where black politics had to be practicable, prudent, concrete, and at times inescapably deceitful.

Responding to Villard, Washington explained that the North and the South afforded starkly different possibilities and opportunities for African Americans: "[It] is comparatively easy for you in [the North] to discuss the problem, but do so always with a view of looking not to your own interests, but to those of the larger

24 "Letter from BTW to Oswald Garrison Villard, January 10, 1911," in *BTWP*, 542-43.

25 "Letter from BTW to Oswald Garrison Villard, January 10, 1911," in *BTWP*, 541.

26 Booker T. Washington, "An Extract from the Proceedings of the Washington Conference of the National Sociological Society, November 10, 1903," in *BTWP*, 7:342.

masses of our people in the South.”<sup>27</sup> “We need organizations,” Washington insisted, “both national and local in character, in order that all the issues of the race may be reached and may be emphasized.”<sup>28</sup> In the South, challenging white supremacy would require a more institutional, programmatic politics: “What we can construct, what we can project, is what will bring us relief.”<sup>29</sup> Washington took the position that a negative politics could not lead to the establishment of the economic and social bases necessary for an effective, prolonged freedom struggle in the South. The way forward for black southerners was to empower themselves economically, socially, and culturally. His conviction that they were going to have to do this work themselves was based on a coldly realistic, even pessimistic, and somberly empirical assessment.

Villard was unimpressed with Washington’s argument that Jim Crow was a new and distinct form of racial domination and as such required a more prudent politics. Like most activists and journalists he had an unshakable faith in the emancipatory power of protest and the pen. The right temperament—“the Garrisonian temperament”—was what was needed to dismantle Jim Crow.

I do not think that bad conditions should be glossed over. I think every leader of the race, for instance, ought to come out and denounce in unmitigated terms the movement towards segregation. . . . It seems to me that where we differ is in the fundamental philosophy. You feel that this is the best way to aid the case; I feel that other ways are better, and that stressing the evils of the situation ought never to be neglected for a moment. . . . I am glad indeed to read the extracts from your speeches[,] which you are good enough to enclose in this letter. They could not be improved upon as far as they go, *but they do not go far enough to satisfy any Garrison*. Perhaps this is the fault of the Garrisonian temperament, but it is a fact.<sup>30</sup>

Villard was remarkably confident that he knew what was best for African Americans in the South and what form of leadership they deserved. No wonder Washington replied in agitation: “Of course, I can easily understand that it would be much more satisfactory in every way if I would do my work according as you and others direct or would direct, but I imagine I shall have to continue doing it in my own way, bringing about such results as I have been able to bring about, and helping as best I can in the general work of uplift.”<sup>31</sup>

Washington’s conviction that political efficacy couldn’t be divorced from political opportunity came not from caring little for ideas, as Harlan has argued, but from

27 “Letter from BTW to Oswald Garrison Villard, January 10, 1911,” in *BTWP*, 341–42.

28 “Letter from BTW to Oswald Garrison Villard, January 10, 1911,” in *BTWP*, 341.

29 “Letter from BTW to Oswald Garrison Villard, January 10, 1911,” in *BTWP*, 342.

30 “Letter from Oswald Garrison Villard to BTW, February 7, 1911,” in *BTWP*, 10:573–74; emphasis added.

31 “Letter from BTW to Oswald Garrison Villard, February 11, 1911,” in *BTWP*, 10:575.

prioritizing institutions, especially those that provided the material and social resources needed to effectively challenge white supremacy. A staunch materialist—in the antebellum republican vein—and a resolute realist, he focused on changing the economic, political, and social preconditions that lay behind the conditions of power and powerlessness. This focus explains much of his preoccupation with context, judgment, constraints, and strategy, and his belief that African American leaders in the South had little choice but to endorse an ethics of ambivalence.

The dangers Washington faced were real, a fact easily substantiated by the Pinkerton Detective Agency files.<sup>32</sup> “I have always recognized . . . that there is work to be done which no one placed in my position can do, which no one living in the South perhaps can do,” he wrote.<sup>33</sup> There are those who “openly advocate my assassination and the destruction of our school property. I received, of course, any number of threatening letters,” Washington told Francis Jackson Garrison, one of the sons of William Lloyd Garrison and uncle to Villard.<sup>34</sup> Francis Garrison wrote back: “Indeed, I have long felt, as I have told you, the possibility of the torch being applied even to Tuskegee in some sudden whirlwind of passion such as may at any time sweep through the Black Belt, and my heart aches to think of the strain to which you are constantly subjected. . . . I know how many elements of both North and South you have to consider in anything which you may say or write.”<sup>35</sup>

To ask Washington and Afro-southerners to openly and defiantly confront Jim Crow was equivalent to asking them to throw themselves to the lynch mob. As Judith Shklar has written, a demand for self-sacrifice has no place in politics. “There is absolutely nothing elevated in death and dying. . . . Self-sacrifice may stir our admiration, but it is not, by definition, a political duty, but an act of supererogation which falls outside the realm of politics.”<sup>36</sup>

There were, of course, prominent northerners who defended Washington’s tactics. In 1908, in a letter to the editor of the *Boston Transcript*, another member of the Garrison family, William Lloyd Garrison Jr., defended Washington’s politics and praised his skill in navigating the white supremacist South.

Mr. Washington is working in the most inflammable portion of the South. He not only carries the burden of a great university, but upon his shoulders has fallen the

32 Pinkerton Agents #58 and #22, “Three Reports of Pinkerton Detectives,” in *BTWP*, 8:418–20. For example, a white Southerner, C. B. Church Sr., sent a death threat to Washington in 1901: “Wo[e] Nigger the day is not far distant when you will be swept from the face of the earth.” “Letter from C. B. Church Sr. to BTW, 1901,” in *BTWP*, 6:367. During his southern educational tours, Washington received a letter from J. Matony of Cynthia, Mississippi, warning him: “Please do not make your visit to Jackson, Miss. . . . You will never leave in peace but in corpse or some other way, but do [sic] not like you come.” Pinkerton Agents #58 and #22, “Reports of Pinkerton Detective F. E. Miller,” in *BTWP*, 9:640–46.

33 “Letter to Oswald Garrison Villard from BTW, May 28, 1909,” in *BTWP*, 10:119.

34 “Letter to Francis Jackson Garrison from BTW, October 5, 1905,” in *BTWP*, 8:395.

35 “Letter to BTW from Francis Jackson Garrison, October 12, 1905,” in *BTWP*, 8:402.

36 “Letter to BTW from Francis Jackson Garrison, October 12, 1905,” in *BTWP*, 8:402.



mission to disarm sectional hostility, to draw support from Southern whites with inherited prejudices that must be allayed, ever to keep a hopeful front under circumstances which must at times chill the heart, to discern events in their proper proportion, never to allow discouragement to blind him to the real signs of promise, and to preserve a serenity and poise that are a marvel to his friends and a confusion to his enemies. What unusual qualities meet and blend in one capable of such achievement! . . . I appreciate the difficulties which encompass him. I wonder at his patience, courage, and sagacity. For myself, with no restraint of speech, save those of fealty to truth and the requirements of judgment, I am able to wield a free lance. He, on the contrary, lives in a region where a whisper at times precipitates the avalanche.<sup>37</sup>

Five years after Garrison Jr.'s letter was published, Seth Low, former president of Columbia University, ex-mayor of New York City, and then-chairman of the board of Tuskegee Institute, wrote a private letter to Villard responding to Villard's most recent criticisms of Washington.

I fancy that your honored Grandfather, to whom you refer, might easily have said to President Lincoln what you say of Washington, "How pitiful it is that this big man cannot also be brave!" From my own observation Dr. Washington does not seem to me to lack any courage; but his philosophy of the situation is radically different from your own. Personally, I think there is room and need for both philosophies. To borrow a military figure, your own is a frontal attack; Dr. Washington's is a flank movement. But while both movements may be good, those who are identified with one cannot ordinarily be useful in the other; and I think that Dr. Washington represents a force of too great value to justify him in exposing himself to misunderstanding by active cooperation with those whose fundamental philosophy is so different from his own. On this point I think Dr. Washington's judgment is far more likely to be correct than either yours or mine; and, therefore, I think that he is entitled to be kindly interpreted in the stand that he takes, however much you may regret it.<sup>38</sup>

In the private correspondences quoted above Washington made it clear that because his leadership was based in the Deep South he had little choice but to express himself in such a way as to calm white southerners' fear of African American challenges to the status quo. Conditions in the postemancipation South constrained not only expressions of black political agency but also expressions of his own political thought and action, what he could say in his speeches and public writings. It is evident that Washington's use of moderate and judicious language was self-consciously strategic.

37 William Lloyd Garrison Jr., letter to the editor, *Boston Transcript*, January 11, 1908, in *BTWP*, 9:438-40.

38 "Letter from Seth Low to Oswald Garrison Villard, April 9, 1913," in *BTWP*, 12:166-67.

### Washington's Ethics of Ambivalence

Washington repeatedly wrote on the need for equivocation in public life, at times acknowledging his own use of evasion, concealment, and deceit. We value truthfulness and sincerity and condemn deceit; social trust seems unthinkable if people refuse to express what they believe. These moral judgments hold true in a community of social equals,<sup>39</sup> but the Jim Crow South was far from being such a place. In that context, Washington explained, he had to use the weapons of silence, evasion, and deceit to advance the greater good.

His explanations for using deceit are often articulated within the context of wider discussions of constraints imposed on African American political speech and action in the Jim Crow South. Clearly, if Washington were driven only by self-interest and the desire for personal power he would simply have practiced duplicity without publicly reflecting on its merits. To better understand his motivation for openly addressing ambivalent, if not deceptive, speech, this section looks at his retrospective contextualizing and framing of his famous 1895 Atlanta Address. I see these reflections as his effort to repurpose the speech as a model for an effective style of political address, one that African American leaders in the South would be wise to emulate. More broadly, I contend that he was asserting that to advocate effectively for their people, black leaders in the South had to master the skills of manipulation and dissimulation. As unelected representatives of the disenfranchised, these leaders had to appeal to constituencies whose desires were essentially irreconcilable. They had to appease whites' fears, gain their goodwill, and exploit their intragroup conflicts while retaining the trust of African Americans.

Washington's Atlanta speech was exemplary in its use of equivocation and ambiguity to simultaneously affirm and challenge the prejudices of his day. Looking back on it, he wrote: "I knew that what I said would be listened to by Southern white people, by people of my own race and by Northern white people. I was determined from the start not to give undue offense to the South and thus prevent it from thus honoring another Negro in the future. And at the same time I was equally determined to be true to the North and to the interests of my own race."<sup>40</sup> According to Washington, a black leader in the South is morally obligated to weigh the interests of his or her people when making public statements.

Atlanta's Cotton States and International Exposition, which ran from September to December 1895, was designed to promote the transformation of the economy of the South from agrarian to industrial, with Atlanta as its center. To actualize this vision required investment from northern industrialists, who were

39 For a defense of truth and sincerity as social and moral virtues see Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 84–122.

40 Washington, *The Story of My Life and Work*, in *BTWP*, 1:71. Also see Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in *BTWP*, 1:327.

assured that establishing manufacturing facilities in the South would yield them easy profits, given the ready availability of white and black labor and the relative absence of labor unions. Another goal of the exposition was to alleviate concerns about recent assaults by the state's Populist Party on business and banks.<sup>41</sup> To attract investment, the South had to present itself as politically and socially stable, a place safe for economic growth and industrial development. The exhibits attracted around thirteen thousand visitors a day by November and over a million visitors in total, the overwhelming majority of whom were southern whites.<sup>42</sup> However, the exposition drew attention throughout the country via widespread press coverage.

Washington, well aware of both the purpose of the exposition and its national importance, knew he had to walk a tightrope. His mostly white southern audience of thousands, unfailingly committed to Jim Crow, would be listening to a speech from a black man on an integrated stage in the heart of the segregated South. Washington noted that it "was the first time in the entire history of the Negro that a member of my race had been asked to speak from the same platform with white Southern men and women on any important National occasion."<sup>43</sup> The speech, he wrote later, required a sense of "delicacy and responsibility."<sup>44</sup> He had every reason for fear as the day approached.

I felt a good deal as I suppose a man feels when he is on his way to the gallows. In passing through the town of Tuskegee I met a white farmer who lived some distance out in the country. In a jesting manner this man said: "Washington, you have spoken before the Northern white people, the Negroes in the South, and to us country white people in the South; but in Atlanta, to-morrow, you will have before you the Northern whites, the Southern whites, and the Negroes all together. I am afraid that you have got yourself into a tight place." This farmer diagnosed the situation correctly, but his frank words did not add anything to my comfort.<sup>45</sup>

Washington's description of the circumstances under which he spoke in Atlanta supplied his readers with a political context for understanding why he did not openly criticize Jim Crow. Given the makeup of his audience, he had to leave room for uncertainty and misunderstanding whenever he ventured a harsh word against the South or praised the North.

The "white farmer who lived some distance out in the country," whom Wash-

41 Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

42 Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 322.

43 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in *BTWP*, 1:326.

44 Washington, *Story of My Life and Work*, in *BTWP*, 1:70.

45 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in *BTWP*, 1:327-28.

ington quoted or conjured, was likely meant to be representative of a constituency of poor southern whites who opposed the planters and industrialists, making them in some ways natural allies of their African American neighbors. It was a tricky relationship. There were moments of interracial class unity—with the Populists in particular, and especially in Georgia—but Washington had little faith in the poor whites who filled the ranks of that party; he considered them untrustworthy and unreliable political partners. Tom Watson, a native Georgian and the Populists' main spokesman, actively supported segregation, as did many members of his party. Their white supremacist beliefs lay close to the surface. The persistence of lynching did little to quell Washington's concerns. His insight was that whites could be radical but black southerners could not be.

Washington began his speech by appealing to the southern powers that be for investment in job opportunities and public schooling for African Americans, who, he explained, were vital to the economic growth and prosperity of what Henry Grady, the influential editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, dubbed the "New South." This postwar South, as Grady envisioned it, while socially traditional and unapologetic for its racial past, was ready to take its place in a modern industrial economy.<sup>46</sup> Washington knew that he could not launch an attack against Jim Crow in his speech, but he recognized that he had an ideal podium from which to exploit white southerners' narrow self-interests. Economic "opportunity here afforded will awaken among us a new era of industrial progress," Washington told the audience.<sup>47</sup> "No enterprise seeking the material, civil, or moral welfare of this section can disregard this element of our population and reach the highest success."<sup>48</sup> Turning his attention to the African Americans in the crowd, he advised them to seek out and exploit what possibilities there were in the South, because they would remain in the South for the near future. "Cast down your bucket where you are," Washington urged.<sup>49</sup>

Washington had to phrase his advocacy for job opportunities and education for African Americans in a way that would not intensify whites' already high fears of black economic competition and social advancement. The devastating economic conditions in the 1890s had hit Georgia especially hard, so having to compete with blacks for jobs threatened whites. Between 1889 and 1900, 2,522 African Americans were lynched.<sup>50</sup> Mississippi was the leading site, followed by Georgia.<sup>51</sup> Washington warned African Americans not to "underestimate the importance

46 Henry Grady, *The New South: Writings and Speeches of Henry Grady* (Savannah, GA: Beehive, 1971), 11–12.

47 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in BTWP, 1:331.

48 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in BTWP, 1:330.

49 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in BTWP, 1:331.

50 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Thirty Years Lynching: In the United States 1889–1918* (New York: Negro University Press, 1919).

51 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

of cultivating friendly relations” with white southerners, urging them to do so in “every manly way.”<sup>52</sup> Black southerners had no other choice, he insisted, since they were surrounded by hostile whites and constrained by economic and political forces beyond their control.<sup>53</sup>

In his Atlanta speech, Washington encouraged the white planter class and industrialists to seek out African American workers. One of his worries was that European immigrants, because they were white, would be hired over blacks.

To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted I would repeat what I say to my own race, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” Cast it down among the 8,000,000 Negroes whose habits you know. . . . Casting down your bucket among my people, helping and encouraging them as you are doing on these grounds, and to education of head, hand, and heart, you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste place in your fields, and run your factories.<sup>54</sup>

Washington was offering the whites in attendance a paternalist bargain: by lifting up a downtrodden but loyal people, you will grow wealthier.

Washington’s pitch was that Afro-southerners could significantly influence the economic development of the region and should not be confined to menial jobs. The race would “*buy* your surplus, make productive your land, and *run* your factories.” Though African Americans were disenfranchised and segregated, they could, he warned, still derail the progress of an industrial South. The race would be “patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful” as long as they were accepted into the new economy as mutual partners, but if the South continued to defund public education for African Americans and deny them equal opportunities to compete for employment, the outcome would be dire. “Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upwards, or they will pull against you the load downwards.”<sup>55</sup>

“There is no security for any of us except in the highest intelligence and development of all. If anywhere there are efforts tending to curtail the fullest growth of the Negro,” Washington continued, “let these efforts be turned into stimulating, encouraging, and making him the most useful and intelligent citizen.”<sup>56</sup> It was daring of Washington to speak of African American citizenship at a moment of rapidly rising political disenfranchisement.

52 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in BTWP, 1:331.

53 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in BTWP, 1:331.

54 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in BTWP, 1:332.

55 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in BTWP, 1:332.

56 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in BTWP, 1:332.

Washington proceeded to address the explosive question of social segregation, the trickiest topic for a black man to navigate before a southern white audience. It was at this point in his speech that Washington delivered what would become his most famous—and infamous—sentence: “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”<sup>57</sup> These twenty-seven words would not only thrust Washington into history but would also determine his political and intellectual place in American thought.

The speech was widely praised by both his white and black contemporaries. Those who embraced the common Gilded Age assumption that the marketplace is the best arbiter of social problems interpreted Washington’s words as support for a laissez-faire approach to Jim Crow. White political elites thought Washington did a splendid job.<sup>58</sup> Congratulations poured in from notable African Americans,<sup>59</sup> who agreed that, given the context, Washington’s speech was a phenomenal success.

However, not everyone was thrilled. Some colleagues were puzzled by his seeming capitulation to racial segregation; they included Mary Collins, a friend of Washington and sister of Ellen Collins, the liberal reformer who had worked in tenement houses in New York. In a letter to Washington, Ellen said Mary wondered whether he was being “too generous.”<sup>60</sup> A few days later Ellen Collins made her own views known: “But I believe your mind moves well under the control of principle and the guidance of judgment. Perhaps you might have been a little more

57 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, in *BTWP*, 1:332.

58 Grover Cleveland wrote, “I thank you with much enthusiasm for making the address. . . . Your words cannot fail to delight and encourage all who wish well for your race.” “Letter from Grover Cleveland to BTW, October 6, 1895,” in *BTWP*, 4:50. Clark Howell, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, said that the speech was “the beginning of a moral revolution in America.” Clark Howell, *New York World*, September 18, 1895. The Texas Freeman wrote that the speech “stamps [Washington] as a most worthy representative of a large part of the country’s citizenship. Without resort to hyperbolic exaggeration, it is but simple justice to call the address great. It was great.” The *Richmond Planet* called it “calm, dispassionate, logical.” Quoted in *New York World*, September 19, 1895. The *New York World* wrote that “it was as if the orator had bewitched them.” “South’s New Epoch,” *New York World*, September 19, 1895.

59 Washington’s prudence was a thing of collective pride. Du Bois wrote to Washington saying: “[Let] me heartily congratulate you upon your phenomenal success at Atlanta—it was a word fitly spoken.” “Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to BTW, September 24, 1895,” in *BTWP*, 4:26. Timothy Thomas Fortune, the civil rights activist and editor, said: “[It] looks as if you are our Douglass and I am glad of it.” “Letter from T. Thomas Fortune to BTW, September 26, 1895,” in *BTWP*, 4:31. Edward W. Blyden, the black nationalist, shot off a letter that said: “[Your] address was an inspiration,” and by a “singular coincidence you are the namesake, not probably by inheritance but by gift of the ‘Father of his country.’ But your work in some respects is greater than his. He freed one race from foreign domination, leaving another chained and manacled. But your words and your work will tend to free two races from prejudices and false views of life.” “Letter from Edward Wilmot Blyden to BTW, September 24, 1895,” in *BTWP*, 4:27.

60 “Letter from Ellen Collins to BTW, September 24, 1895,” in *BTWP*, 4:25.

independent; in view of the long, long, suffering of your people a little irritation would have been pardonable. I am glad you avoided it. I should be a little sorry for a part of what you promise of loyalty . . . if it were not followed by the demand for the administration of justice.”<sup>61</sup> Writing to the prominent Presbyterian minister and civil rights activist Francis Grimké, Washington stressed the context in which he delivered the speech: “You can easily see that I had rather a difficult task. . . . There were some things that I felt should be said to the colored people and some others to white people; and aside from these considerations I wanted to so deport myself as not to make such an impression as would prevent a similar opportunity being offered some other colored man in the South.”<sup>62</sup> Washington reconfigured the republican ethos, which places the common good above self-interest, when he insisted that a black leader in the South has a civic duty to craft public statements with an eye to the security and improvement of black lives, even if doing so means sacrificing conscience.

Washington may well have anticipated that the metaphor of a hand would be interpreted by some as affirming, or at least not outright challenging, Jim Crow segregation. At the time, “social” was widely recognized as synonymous with “private,” even intimate, relations.<sup>63</sup> “Social equality” concerned personal relationships, not equal civil rights. Additionally, the term had a particular meaning in the Jim Crow South, as Washington explained to Ednah Dow Cheney, a leader of the women’s rights movement, educational philanthropist, and intellectual.

In referring to the social conditions I simply meant to emphasize the condition which I think obtains throughout the world, that is, I simply meant to say that each individual regulated his own social intercourse. . . . Now of course I understand that there are a great many things in the south which southern white people class as social intercourse that is not really so. If anybody understood me as meaning that riding in the same railroad car or sitting in the same room at a railroad station is social intercourse they certainly got a wrong idea of my position.<sup>64</sup>

Far from endorsing segregation, Washington was distinguishing between *civil* equality and *social* equality. He called for “interlacing our industrial, commercial, *civil*, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are *purely* social we can be as separate as the fin-

61 “Letter from Ellen Collins to BTW, September 28, 1895,” in *BTWP*, 4:33.

62 “Letter from BTW to Francis James Grimké, September 24, 1895,” in *BTWP*, 4:25.

63 Kelly Miller, an African American educator-activist and contemporary of Washington and Du Bois, wrote that social equality “cannot be defined according to the ordinary import and weight of words.” Kelly Miller, “*Radicals and Conservatives*” and *Other Essays on the Negro in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 123–32. Du Bois admitted that there is another meaning of the term. In the South, “social Equality is the right to demand private companionship with another.” Du Bois, “President Harding and Social Equality,” *Crisis*, December 1921.

64 “Letter from BTW to Ednah Dow Littlehale Cheney, October 15, 1895,” in *BTWP*, 4:57.

gers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”<sup>65</sup> For many, the idea of social equality ran counter to the constitutional rights to privacy and association.

Du Bois, looking back on the speech,<sup>66</sup> wrote that “Mr. Washington said what the South wanted to hear, but said it with rare tact,” when he “touched the keynote not only of the exposition but of the growing American thought on the Negro problem” with his sentence “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential for mutual progress.”<sup>67</sup> Du Bois recalled that his initial reaction to the speech was to write “to the New York AGE, then the leading Colored weekly, commending Mr. Washington’s stand and saying, ‘Have we not here the basis of honorable compromise with the South?’”<sup>68</sup> He also wrote that he “recognized, even then, that the phrase was capable of serious differences of interpretation.”<sup>69</sup> “The Colored people could and would say as I said: the fingers of the hand are in pretty close touch with each other and equal in general esteem if not in ability and prominence. Their separation, moreover, while real, is not great enough to preclude them from being one hand.”<sup>70</sup> But the South “could and did put an interpretation on the speech which came seriously to alarm me and all Colored people. The Negro, it said, has come to his senses. He is willing to surrender political and civil rights; he is going uncomplainingly to work and going to give up agitation for impossible things.”<sup>71</sup> The southern response to the speech, rather than its meaning or its author’s motives, troubled Du Bois.

And Du Bois’s misgivings were somewhat justified. Historians have come to agree that on that afternoon in Atlanta, Washington articulated the constitutive *compromise* of post-Reconstruction race relations in the South.<sup>72</sup> But as Barbara

65 “Letter from BTW to Ednah Dow Littlehale Cheney, October 15, 1895,” in *BTWP*, 4:57. Emphases added.

66 Du Bois, “The Social Significance of Booker T. Washington” (unpublished in Du Bois’s life but recently published in *Du Bois Review* 8, no. 2 [Fall 2011]: 367–76).

67 Du Bois, “The Social Significance of Booker T. Washington,” *Du Bois Review* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 367–76.

68 Du Bois, “The Social Significance of Booker T. Washington,” *Du Bois Review* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 367–76.

69 Du Bois, “The Social Significance of Booker T. Washington,” *Du Bois Review* 8, no. 2 [Fall 2011]: 367–76.

70 Du Bois, “The Social Significance of Booker T. Washington,” *Du Bois Review* 8, no. 2 [Fall 2011]: 367–76.

71 Du Bois, “The Social Significance of Booker T. Washington,” *Du Bois Review* 8, no. 2 [Fall 2011]: 367–76.

72 Rayford Logan argues that Washington led during the “nadir” of race relations, his term, and he therefore had to take a “position . . . far different from the unequivocal standard for equal citizenship advanced by Douglass.” “Washington was convinced, and rightly so, that it would have been folly to ask in 1895 for equal rights for Negroes,” insists Logan. *The Negro in American Life: The Nadir, 1877–1901* (New York: Dial, 1954), 275–76. C. Vann Woodward said that in Atlanta, Washington “framed the modus vivendi of race relations in the New South.” *Origins of the New South: 1877–1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 356.



Fields rightly reminds us, “the *modus vivendi* itself had been determined, as it would continue to be, by means of crop lien and sharecropping, law and constitution,” and lynching.<sup>73</sup> The idea that Washington bears the burden of southern history is hollow and unjust; no single individual was responsible for the rise of white supremacy, and a black man was certainly not.

Washington defended evasion and ambivalence on the grounds that speaking frankly in the South would not only undermine political, social, and economic well-being but also invite bodily harm, constraints that did not apply to the professional activist in the North. Creating false impressions was a vital means of survival. In addition to being necessary forms of defense, reticence, indirection, and simulated agreement could allay white southerners’ anxieties over the economic and social progress of blacks and to enlist northern whites to aid that progress. Still, his deceit had a fatal consequence. It left us with the difficulty of grasping the distance between what he said and what his audiences understood. In structuring ambiguity into his assertions, he made it possible to draw all sorts of inferences from them. When his colleagues gathered what he saw as the wrong conclusions from his public statements, he wrote, but only privately, to express what he actually believed. Seeing that his equivocation led to a constant process of redescribing and clarifying, he used his autobiographies to convey—often by way of stories and anecdotes—his terms of engagement: most of the people in his Atlanta audience had no right to the unvarnished truth, and the communicative relation that obtained between him and his white audiences was based on a social structure that made truthfulness and sincerity of black leaders vices rather than virtues.

### Washington’s Defense of Deception

Washington’s moderate tone won him a hearing from the South and support from the North, but as time went on, his failure to openly condemn Jim Crow alienated a growing number of African American activists and intellectuals. A younger and more radical generation deemed his rhetoric too compromising and called for a return to the fearless and candid politics Frederick Douglass exemplified. In 1903, Du Bois wrote that Washington represents the “old attitude of adjustment and submission” and that Douglass “bravely stood” for “the ideals of manhood,—ultimate assimilation *through* self-assertion, and on no other terms.”<sup>74</sup> In 1908 Kelly Miller wrote, “Douglass was like a lion, bold and fearless; Washington is lambl-like, meek and submissive. Douglass escaped from personal bondage, which his soul abhorred; but for Lincoln’s proclamation, Washington would probably

73 Barbara Fields, “Origins of the New South and the Negro Question,” *Journal of Southern History* 67, no. 4 (November 2001): 812n2.

74 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 398.

have arisen in esteem and favor in the eyes of his master as a good and faithful servant.”<sup>75</sup> Clearly, Washington could not keep relying on private letters to counter the snowballing opposition to his leadership. No longer could he assume his readers were sensitive enough to his nuances to hear his complex message.

In 1903 the George W. Jacobs publishing company invited Washington to write a biography of Frederick Douglass for its American Crisis series, edited by the distinguished historian Ellis P. Oberholtzer. Washington saw this as an opportunity to explicate his belief that under certain circumstances, deception can be a political virtue. By advancing his own politics through his interpretation of Douglass, Washington had a chance to narrow the distance between the perceptions of his leadership style and that of Douglass. To put it another way, the biography allowed Washington to take a deceptive approach to his defense of deception.

Oberholtzer explained to Du Bois, who had agreed to write a volume on John Brown, that the purpose of the series was to provide “an impartial view of the causes, course, and the consequences of the Civil War.”<sup>76</sup> Each volume would portray a well-known figure identified with a particular feature of the struggle.<sup>77</sup> It would be up to the author of each book to decide what ethical and political traits his subject exemplified and how those traits shaped the fate of the republic.

Washington, anticipating that the Douglass family would have strong feelings about the meaning of Douglass’s life, wrote to Douglass’s son Charles that the “book is to be somewhat different from previous biographies of Frederick Douglass.”<sup>78</sup> Unlike most authors, who portrayed “Douglass [as] the incomparable orator of the Abolition cause,” he would focus on Douglass as a “wise counselor” whose “arduous work” was “largely wrought in secret.”<sup>79</sup>

The resulting book, *Frederick Douglass*, published in 1907, stresses Douglass’s moral flexibility, dissimulation, and prudence, three characteristics rarely attributed to the great leader. It begins with the young Douglass’s painful realization that slaves must often use ignoble means to attain noble ends. According to Washington, Douglass, interested from his youth in the nature of moral and political truth, soon learned that he could acquire the knowledge he sought only by cultivating habits of concealment and deceitfulness. To make this point, Washington used the example of the incidents that spurred Douglass’s determination to learn to read and write. Living in Baltimore with his master and mistress,

75 Miller, “*Radicals and Conservatives*” and *Other Essays*. The book was first published in 1908 under the title *Race Adjustment*.

76 George W. Jacobs & Co. letter from George W. Jacobs & Co. to W. E. B. Du Bois, November 11, 1903. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

77 George W. Jacobs & Co. letter from George W. Jacobs & Co. to W. E. B. Du Bois, November 11, 1903.

78 Letter from Booker T. Washington to Charles R. Douglass, February 25, 1904. Booker T. Washington Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Reel 43.

79 Letter from Booker T. Washington to Charles R. Douglass, February 25, 1904.

Hugh and Sophia Auld, his curiosity was aroused when he heard Sophia read the Bible aloud. Drawn to its message, he asked her to teach him to read and she consented.<sup>80</sup> When her husband discovered what she had done, he “at once stopped the perilous practice.”<sup>81</sup> Douglass overheard him warning Sophia that being literate would render the boy unfit for slavery not only because it would lead him to despair over his condition but also because knowing how to read and write would help him escape. These overheard words only deepened his desire for literacy. From then on, Hugh and Sophia vigilantly watched over Douglass to make sure he did not “attempt to teach himself.”<sup>82</sup> However, Douglass devised “many secret schemes to elude the vigilance of his master and mistress.”<sup>83</sup> He “gathered scattered pages of the Bible from the filthy street-gutters, and washed and dried them” so that in his fleeting “moments of leisure” he would “get a word or two of wisdom from them.”<sup>84</sup> In time, he acquired a copy of the *Columbian Orator*, a collection of speeches by statesmen and philosophers, which gave him an introduction to liberty and other natural rights.<sup>85</sup> He derived solace and inspiration from these sources, but, paradoxically, he had to sin and steal to acquire them. “In attaining this knowledge [of literacy] I was compelled to resort to indiscretions by no means congenial to my nature,” Douglass confessed, “and which were really humiliating to my sense of candor and uprightness.”<sup>86</sup>

When, as a teen, Douglass was sent back to the plantation, he experienced the desperate hunger most slaves endured. Washington described him as so “wretchedly starved” that he was “compelled to live at the expense” of his “neighbors.”<sup>87</sup> But his growing moral awareness left him conflicted about pilfering food. After much reflection, he came to the conclusion that because he had no other path to survival, the theft was moral.<sup>88</sup> In addition, he reasoned, he had a remedial right to his master’s provisions: “Considering that my labor and person were the property of Master Thomas, and that I was deprived of the necessities of life—necessaries obtained by my own labor—it was easy to deduce the right to simply appropriating what was my own to the use of my master, since the health and strength derived from such food were exerted in his service.”<sup>89</sup> Douglass concluded that although his actions constituted “stealing, according to law and gospel,” such judgments of right and wrong could not apply in a slave society, based as it was on standards that were inherently immoral.<sup>90</sup> For Washington, Douglass’s telling of the story

80 Booker T. Washington, *Frederick Douglass* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs, 1906), 24–25.

81 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 25.

82 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 25.

83 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 26.

84 Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, in *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 538.

85 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 26.

86 Douglass, *Life and Times*, 529.

87 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 33.

88 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 33.

89 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 33.

90 Douglass, *Life and Times*, 553.

directs attention away from the seeming wrong of the action and toward a consideration of how slavery, in rendering persons property, strips slaves of moral agency and thus moral responsibility. It also discloses Douglass's contemplative attitude toward his use of deceit as a form of resistance. Washington's unstated inference, of course, is that he, Washington, is equally reflective in his use of in-direction and evasion to resist Jim Crow.

Washington drew attention to what he saw as a contradiction between Douglass's emphasis on the power of moral suasion, on the one hand, and his defense of deceit, on the other. He reminded readers that Douglass often referred back to a dialogue he had read in the *Columbian Orator* in which a slave convinced his master that slavery was wrong. In Douglass's words, "The mighty power and heart-searching directness of truth penetrating the heart of a slave-holder and compelling him to yield up his earthly interest to the claims of eternal justice, were finely illustrated in the dialogue," and for him the slave's argument constituted "a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man."<sup>91</sup> Washington's spin on this story was that Douglass did not follow this slave's example, that instead of debating his master he practiced "persistent and petty stealing."<sup>92</sup> Washington was bolstering his own tactics in making the case that Douglass was fully aware that in reality no slave, including himself, could argue his way to freedom.

Washington, agreeing with Douglass that the "morality of free society could have no application to slave society,"<sup>93</sup> hoped to convince his readers that Douglass's philosophical search for moral clarity about "his conduct and the conduct of those about him" led him to defend deceit as ethically and politically virtuous in conditions of extremity. Washington interpreted Douglass as arguing, through conditional reasoning, that deception was morally permissible under domination. Slavery is an extraordinary condition; it imposes a horrible cost on slaves who attempt to live within the boundaries of accepted morality. If Douglass had refused to deceive his master and mistress and instead had openly defended his right to literacy on philosophical grounds, he would have remained trapped in ignorance and slavery. According to Washington, then, Douglass recalled the slave who reasoned his way out of bondage to contest the very idea that a slaveowner would be persuaded by his slave's arguments or protest. To believe so is to apply the moral rules of a free and relatively just society to a slave plantation.

Washington examined Douglass's first, botched escape from slavery in this light. In preparing for the getaway, Douglass pondered the prerequisites for success.<sup>94</sup> First, to allay suspicion, he had to keep a close watch over his own deportment,<sup>95</sup> and second, he had to select trustworthy "partners in this dangerous

<sup>91</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 553.

<sup>92</sup> Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 34.

<sup>93</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 554.

<sup>94</sup> Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 54.

<sup>95</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 607.

undertaking.”<sup>96</sup> He reasoned that only those who had mastered “the tricks of self-concealment, and of assumed indifference and deception,” would be prepared for the “whole range of restraints” they would face.<sup>97</sup> Naturally, knowing whom to trust is difficult if skill in subterfuge is the qualification.

Once he enlisted companions, he forged “free passes” that he hoped would fool slave catchers. Sadly, the escapees were quickly intercepted, and the plan was foiled. Initially Douglass assumed that his “intense longing to be free must have betrayed itself in his countenance”<sup>98</sup>; later he came to the conclusion that one of the slaves had betrayed them.

After this failed escape, with Douglass’s true intentions now out in the open, he had to take “special pains to keep” his master “pleased and unsuspecting.”<sup>99</sup> For months, Douglass wore the mask of a happy and contented slave to veil his rebellious intents. When his master’s guard came down, Douglass successfully escaped to the North by pretending to be a free sailor—another act Washington added to his examples of how Douglass practiced evasion and deceit.

Washington thought that the skills African Americans learned in slavery should be employed in the struggle against Jim Crow. But as the preeminent black leader of his day, he could not openly advocate for deception as a tactic, much less as a political virtue. To recover for the present the slave’s use of deception, Washington reconfigured Douglass’s deceit as judiciousness. Washington stressed that it was prudence that allowed Douglass to survive and escape slavery and that prepared him to be an effective abolitionist and a statesman. He drew a stark distinction between the abolitionist movement carried out by Garrison and the fight led by Douglass. His claim was that Garrison’s motivation was “non-political”<sup>100</sup> because it regarded slavery principally as a moral problem. For Garrison, slavery was “a national sin which could be reached only by appeal to national conscience.”<sup>101</sup> Garrisonians, Washington added, “sought to effect a revolution, but by moral regeneration of the people.”<sup>102</sup> The “revolution he [Garrison] sought to effect was a purely spiritual one: he aimed to change men’s minds and hearts. The power he desired to overthrow was a state of mind—a state of mind which permitted slavery to exist.”<sup>103</sup> Garrisonians’ call for disunion “was primarily a discharge of conscience from all complicity with slavery and only secondarily a means to the abolition of slavery.”<sup>104</sup>

Washington asserted that Garrison’s severe morality could not in itself have

96 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 43.

97 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 43.

98 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 54.

99 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 57.

100 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 122.

101 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 122–23.

102 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 122–23.

103 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 131.

104 Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 123.

been an effective weapon against slavery. Slavery required a political solution, one that could be achieved only by a leader who demonstrated exemplary statesmanship—that is, Douglass.

This shockingly unsympathetic interpretation of Garrison shows Washington attempting to draw attention to the aspects of Douglass's leadership that were in line with Washington's pragmatism. In contrast to Garrison, Douglass "was by temperament a politician, and, like all politicians, more or less an opportunist. He was less interested in the theory upon which slavery should be abolished than he was in the means by which freedom could be achieved. No doubt he was influenced to a considerable degree . . . by his practical sense of what the situation demanded. . . . Douglass, with less consistency, perhaps, and a keener sense for the practical exigencies of the situation [than Garrison], was undoubtedly influenced by desire to get in close touch with this larger audience."<sup>105</sup> From Washington's point of view, it was not Garrison's uncompromising moral conviction that brought an end to slavery but Douglass's practical political skills, along with his orientation toward the masses rather than the elites. In short, to win their cause, the oppressed and powerless must make moral compromises.

Washington invoked Douglass as the prudent leader who destroyed slavery and realized emancipation. To intensify the differences between judiciousness and righteousness, he likened Douglass to Abraham Lincoln, another leader who practiced prudent deception. To attain political power, Lincoln could not reveal his abolitionist desires. If he had made it plain that his goal was "to save the black man from further enslavement, the South would very possibly have won."<sup>106</sup> It was only when slavery threatened the North's economic growth and political supremacy that "men and women, who had heretofore been indifferent or silent, became actively concerned, and felt impelled to take a definite stand" against slavery.<sup>107</sup> Washington argued that Douglass, the shrewd statesman, grasped Lincoln's gifts as a politician and "did all he could to enforce the arguments and extend the steadily growing influence of Mr. Lincoln."<sup>108</sup>

Throughout the second half of the biography, Washington attributed Douglass's success as a leader to pragmatism and prudence, citing them as key to finding feasible solutions to the problems at hand—emancipation. But earlier Washington stressed Douglass's reflective attitude toward practicing deceit as a necessary means for surviving, resisting, and escaping slavery. This emphasis sits uneasily with his reading of Douglass as a realist politician, someone that thought of slavery in exclusively political terms. Still, presenting Douglass in this way was a subtle and brilliant tactic in Washington's struggle to maintain his legitimacy and prestige in the face of criticism. According to Washington's formulation, the

<sup>105</sup> Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 123.

<sup>106</sup> Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 214.

<sup>107</sup> Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 203.

<sup>108</sup> Washington, *Frederick Douglass*, 203.

portrait that Du Bois painted of Douglass as defiant and uncompromising was not accurate; the man was actually a realistic politician. By deriding Garrison's leadership as weakened by moral rigidity and praising Douglass's realpolitik, Washington positioned himself as Douglass's true heir.

## Conclusion

Booker T. Washington's emphasis on deception brings up questions about political morality. There are times when we might think, along with Du Bois, that in speaking for black southerners Washington had a moral obligation to clearly and courageously condemn white supremacy. His northern critics were rightly enraged that black men and women were lynched for violating the slightest of social norms. But because white supremacy transformed the most innocent of public gestures by an African American into a life-and-death activity, how could there have been any room for a militant black politics in 1890s rural Alabama? To insist that Washington should have taken a confrontational stance against the South is, in effect, to say that he should have risked his life and the lives of his family, faculty, and students to prove he was not an apologist for white supremacy. To apply the public ethics of the North to the South, as his critics did, or to impose on the past the moral expectations of the present, as so many of us do today, separates Washington's words from their context. Ironically, disregarding the realities of the time has the effect of cleansing the Jim Crow South of the appalling constraints it placed on black men and women.

Washington's emphasis on deception also relates directly to questions of how we should study the history of political thought. If the most obvious task for the historian of ideas is to convey to readers facts and theoretical implications they cannot easily learn otherwise, then any study of Washington faces an array of interpretive problems.

Simply stating to readers that Washington was neither a coward nor an unscrupulous politician does not suffice. The historian of political thought must demonstrate to readers how he or she arrived at those judgments. And therein lies the hermeneutic trap. How do we interpret a thinker who had life-and-death reasons for concealing from us what he actually thought and did? This is hardly a question that can be fully explored in a chapter.<sup>109</sup> In this essay I have tried to portray Washington as thoroughly attuned to his context and to describe how he responded to shifting values.

The first part of my argument has been that in his private correspondence with some of his friends and critics, Washington explained why he could not lead a frontal attack on Jim Crow and why he had to resort to a flank attack that meant

109 For a full answer to this problem and a revelation of the radical deeds Washington's words concealed, see my book *Dark Virtues: Booker T. Washington's Tragic Realism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).

concealing from the public his true aspirations. Next, I contended that Washington was not only an exemplar but also a teacher of deception, and that he used his autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, to impart a rhetorical model for black leaders in the South to emulate. Washington believed that to be effective combatants, black leaders had to learn to withhold or conceal what they actually thought. Finally, I posit that Washington's own battle with the problem of conveying dark virtues can be found in his biography of Frederick Douglass. Since Washington could not openly discuss deceit and also retain the respect and support of whites, as well as many African Americans, he chose to use the biography to voice his defense of deception as a political virtue in times of extremity. His interpretation, which aligned him with the unassailably radical Douglass, was an attempt to both clarify his beliefs and to salvage his reputation.

Since we have come this far, we may as well go a bit further. Historians of ideas and political theorists are trained to presume that an author is expressing his or her ideas candidly, and most of us are not immune to making that presupposition. Starting out with the belief that a writer is being straightforward can result in our reading the words of the persecuted and vulnerable in the same way we read the words of the relatively free and secure. If the study of intellectual history and political theory is going to attend to voices from below, then it cannot rely on an interpretive method that offers the same guidance for reading the victors as it does for reading the vanquished.<sup>110</sup> Washington made no secret of the fact that he spoke and wrote under persecution and that this context shaped his public statements and at times made bold assertions impossible. Washington did not offer moral guidance for ordinary times. His was a politics suspended between realism and tragedy.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>110</sup> In *Dark Virtues*, I argue that while Leo Strauss is to be praised for offering a method for reading the silent arts of philosophical resistance, his method rests on faulty assumptions. First, he considers persecution a problem faced by philosophers rather than by public men and women. Second, and relatedly, he presupposes that the author conveys beneath the surface of philosophical conformity esoteric lessons accessible only to those who have learned the talmudic habits of this privileged wisdom, thereby ignoring the lay reader. Third, he pays no attention to those who offer practical lessons for surviving and combating persecution. See, e.g., Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014).

<sup>111</sup> An expanded version of this chapter will appear in my forthcoming volume *Dark Virtues: Booker T. Washington's Tragic Realism*.



## 8: Anna Julia Cooper

### Radical Relationality and the Ethics of Interdependence

Carol Wayne White

*The philosophic mind sees that its own “rights” are the rights of humanity.*

**Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South***

In the last several decades, scholarship on Anna Julia Cooper has increased significantly, drawing attention to her wide range of ideas on race, intersectional feminism, and international politics, and to her lifelong work as an educator, political activist, and community leader.<sup>1</sup> In a 2016 study, for example, Vincent Lloyd includes Cooper’s work in his revival of a black natural law tradition that he believes offers the best way of approaching politics in the contemporary world.<sup>2</sup> In Lloyd’s reading, Cooper’s performance of black natural law involves the critique of ideology, including white supremacy and patriarchy, and participation in social movements for justice, especially those focusing on education and commu-

1 Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Crossroad, 1994); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, eds., *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper, including “A Voice from the South” and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Karen Johnson, *Uplifting the Women and the Race: The Lives, Educational Philosophies and Social Activism of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs*, Studies in African American History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2000); M. S. Giles, “Special Focus, Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, 1858–1964: Teacher, Scholar, and Timeless Womanist,” *Journal of Negro Education* 75, no. 4 (2004): 621–34; Jane Gordon, “Failures of Language and Laughter: Anna Julia Cooper and Contemporary Problems of Humanistic Pedagogy,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 38 (2007): 163–78; Vivian M. May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Stephanie Y. Evans, “African American Women Scholars and International Research: Dr. Anna Julia Cooper’s Legacy of Study Abroad,” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 18 (2007): 77–100; Vivian M. May, “‘It Is Never a Question of the Slaves’: Anna Julia Cooper’s Challenge to History’s Silences in Her 1925 Sorbonne Thesis,” *Callaloo* 31, no. 3 (2008): 903–18; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “Black Feminist Studies: The Case of Anna Julia Cooper,” *African American Review* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 11–15; Kathryn T. Gines and Ronald R. Sundstrom, eds., *Philosophia Africana: Analysis of Philosophy and Issues in African and the Black Diaspora*, special issue, *Anna Julia Cooper*, 12, no. 1 (March 2009); Shirley Moody Turner, ed., *African American Review*, special section on Anna Julia Cooper, 43, no. 1 (Spring 2009); Carol Wayne White, “Anna Julia Cooper: Relational Humanity and the Interplay of One and All,” in *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016): 47–74.

2 Vincent Lloyd, *Black Natural Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), ix.

nity building.<sup>3</sup> With a different focus and level of analysis, Vivian May's 2007 study of Cooper as a visionary black feminist also emphasized Cooper's social justice work as a distinctive type of feminist political praxis.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter I share these robust readings of Cooper as an astute thinker and activist intent on provoking American society into a radical transformation of its cultural values and institutional practices. With Lloyd, I believe a key aspect of understanding Cooper's genius as a political activist is found in her nascent views of human nature; however, I do not share the explicit theological and metaphysical interpretations of Cooper's work that Lloyd favors in *BNL*.<sup>5</sup> Rather, following May's lead, I ground Cooper's vision of liberation in the complexity of diverse perspectives (social, ethical, political, feminist, philosophic, etc.) found in Cooper's writings, without privileging a theological (or Christian) framework.<sup>6</sup> In doing so I focus on Cooper's richly textured, nuanced language, which I believe provides layers of possible interpretation to her engaged political activism and humanistic orientations.

In her range of activities as orator, scholar, community activist, and educator, Cooper demonstrates a basic orientation toward life that paradigmatically highlights the central features of political thought featured in this volume. A close reading of her corpus shows Cooper consistently identifying principles that advanced nuanced approaches to justice, freedom, and equality. Addressing problematic gendered, racialized, and class power dynamics in various institutions, Cooper sought a readjustment of relationships among all Americans that would ensure the dignity and worth of each individual. In short, I propose that Cooper's mature intellectual vision demonstrates a particular vision of a transformed America, as well as viable ways of achieving its transformation. Advancing this view, I build on a core theme across Cooper's work—what I call her politics of radical relationality—in which the fate of each individual (or the one) is inextricably connected to all (or the many). Central to this vision is Cooper's conception of humanity, often described in naturalistic evolutionary terms, which she used to challenge racial, gender, and class injustices of her day. She also appealed to a communal ontology in her view of humanity in order to assert the inherent worth

3 Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*, 33.

4 May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist*, 178.

5 In justifying Cooper's inclusion in the black natural law tradition, Lloyd contends that her view of human nature is grounded in a theological perspective that he describes as follows: "Crucially, the black natural law tradition is committed to the view that no worldly description of the human suffices. Just as God exceeds all worldly description, the image of God in humanity exceeds all worldly descriptions" (Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*, xi). I do not share this view of Cooper, seeing her work as much more nuanced and humanistically oriented. For further reading, see my chapter on Cooper titled "Anna Julia Cooper: Relational Humanity and the Interplay of One and All," in *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 47–74.

6 See May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist*, 43, where May describes Cooper's passion for the political, ethical, and philosophic value of speaking from multiple locations, as well as a sense of Cooper's reflexive and situated phenomenological work as a thinker.

and value of African Americans and other marginalized groups in North America at a time when their humanity was questioned or ignored.

After providing a brief introduction to Cooper and her unique voice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I discuss the extent to which she urged her contemporaries to begin envisioning a new model of relational humanity on which particular political and ethical values could be advanced. Following this, I examine aspects of Cooper's religious-social ethics and her educational philosophy that emanated from her philosophical anthropology—both viable avenues for Cooper in restructuring America. In the final section I connect Cooper's politics of relationality to her vision of America as a relational whole where the destinies of one and all are inextricably tied, and I briefly discuss Cooper's sense of national transformation and promise. I also mention Cooper's self-reflections on her efforts. While focusing primarily on the set of essays included in *A Voice from the South* (1892), I also include other writings by Cooper that are not as well known.

### 1. A Voice among Many: Conjoining the One and the All

Anna Julia Cooper was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, on August 10, 1858, to an enslaved mother (Hannah Stanley [Haywood], 1817–99) and began her formal education at nine years of age at Saint Augustine Normal School in Raleigh.<sup>7</sup> She later matriculated at Oberlin College, earning a BA in mathematics in 1884 and an MA for college teaching in 1887. Throughout her life, Cooper was involved in various educational pursuits and vocations aimed at transforming the lives of the underserved and marginalized.<sup>8</sup> As a teacher and principal at the famous “M-Street” High School—formally the Washington High School for Negroes, later renamed Dunbar High School—where she worked until 1930, Cooper introduced an innovative liberal arts curriculum that helped many of the students gain entrance into the best colleges in the nation. Upon retirement from Dunbar, from 1930 to 1941 Cooper was involved with Frelinghuysen University in Washington, DC—a local university designed to assist working and adult African Americans—both teaching there and serving as its president. She also earned her PhD (1925) from the Sorbonne in Paris, completing a dissertation titled “L'Attitude de la France à l'égard de l'esclavage pendant la Révolution.” In this work Cooper addressed France's attitudes toward slavery, examining how they contradicted French ideas of liberty and freedom and also influenced the French and Haitian Revolutions. Cooper was also a

7 Recent biographical sources indicate that this may be the likely date of Cooper's birth, although it has also been recorded as 1859 and 1860.

8 Cooper's many educational and service activities are too numerous to name here; however, the wide range of activities include her work at a war camp sometime after World War I in Indianapolis, her role in facilitating the opening of the first YWCA chapter for black women in Washington, DC, and her supervision of the Colored Settlement House in Washington. She also had a leadership role in the Washington Colored Woman's League, which eventually became a part of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs.

prolific writer, authoring *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (1892), a collection of essays and speeches featuring her intersectional feminist analysis of American culture, as well as other critical commentaries addressing a wide range of social, political, and theoretical concerns that preoccupied her throughout life.<sup>9</sup>

In her diverse roles as author, teacher, and community leader, Cooper insisted that all people, not just the favored heirs of past unjust systems, should enjoy the benefits of full citizenship. In “Colored Women as Wage Earners,” originally published in *Southern Workman* in 1899, Cooper applies this general principle to issues of labor and economics when advocating that unpaid domestic labor be seen as productive wage labor. Introducing a general economic theory that posited labor, along with capital and land, as a key factor contributing to wealth, Cooper asserted that the worker is worthy of her hire: whatever a person contributes to the wealth should be acknowledged and rewarded. At the same time Cooper seems to be rejecting a crass view of labor where the wage earner is reduced to an object or commodity that can be used and exchanged. A crucial aspect of Cooper’s argument is the recognition that all workers or laborers, especially black women, were full humans endowed with the qualities of volition, subjectivity, and the valuation of life. As she writes: “Every wage-earner, man or woman, owes it to the dignity of the labor he contributes, as well as to his own self-respect, to require the rights due to the quality of service he renders, and to the element of value he contributes to the world’s wealth.”<sup>10</sup>

With the knowledge that many black families were headed by women, Cooper also challenged misogynist and racist notions that black women’s paid labor was surplus labor. Describing the “double disadvantage” faced by black women, Cooper believed that proper training and educational opportunities would increase their intellectual and moral qualities, declaring, “The colored woman as wage-earner must bring to her labor all the capacities, native or acquired, which are of value in the industrial equation. She must really be worth her wage and then claim it.”<sup>11</sup> With these crucial observations and insights, Cooper brings critical awareness to the potentially devastating consequences for black women and black families when wage disparities based on gender and racial inequalities persist, as current surveys in the US continue to show.<sup>12</sup>

9 Other lesser-known writings include Cooper’s memoir about earning her doctorate from the Sorbonne, *The Third Step*, and a memoir about the Grimké family, *The Early Years in Washington: Reminiscences of Life with the Grimkés*.

10 Cooper, “Colored Women as Wage Earners,” *Southern Workman* 28 (August 1899): 295–98, <http://www.huarchivesnet.howard.edu/9908huarnet/cooper3.htm>, accessed November 2017.

11 Cooper, “Colored Women as Wage Earners.”

12 Recent studies show that black women in the United States who work full time year round are typically paid just 63 cents for every dollar paid to non-Hispanic white men. They also show that the persistent gender-based wage gap continues to harm women, their families, and the economy—and it is particularly damaging for black women. For further reading, see “Black Women and the Wage Gap” provided by the National Partnership for Women & Families: <http://>

Cooper's ongoing concern for society's most vulnerable (or voiceless) also inspired her work with the Alley Sanitation Committee, an organization addressing the lack of housing for poor African Americans in Washington, DC, during the Jim Crow era.<sup>13</sup> She was also one of the few African American female representatives to address the first Pan-African Congress in London (1900), which was "an international gathering concerned with the key issues and problems facing 'African humanity'" and conceived to demonstrate "that those of African descent could speak for themselves against all the injustices they faced."<sup>14</sup> Cooper complemented her community activism with crucial theorizations about the necessity of voicing one's desire for freedom. She believed the historical situations and concrete experiences of oppressed peoples should be critically apprehended by the oppressed themselves—by those whose lives are directly harmed by unjust practices.

In the introduction to *A Voice from the South*, Cooper confronts the misleading assumption that the "black problem," and its possible solution, could be fully analyzed or comprehended without the recognition of black women's voices and perspectives. Introducing the theme of "silenced" black women by noting the lack of respect and worth given them within American history, she declares: "The 'other side' has not been represented by one who 'lives there.' And not many can more sensibly realize and more accurately tell the weight and the fret of the 'long dull pain' than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America."<sup>15</sup> In this case and elsewhere, Cooper demonstrates that "oppressed peoples are agents both of knowledge and history, even if their agency, resistance, and alternative ways of knowing have been suppressed or denied by the powerful."<sup>16</sup> This is a crucial idea that anticipates later decolonial discourses and cultural analyses in the twentieth century, as evident in this insight from Colin McFaren and Peter Lankshear: "In order to reclaim their right to live *humanly*, marginalized groups must not only theorize and analyze but also confront, in praxis, those institutions, processes, and ideologies that prevent them from, as Paulo Freire puts it, 'naming their world.'"<sup>17</sup>

Cooper's evocation of the necessity of hearing the black woman's voice when challenging oppressions was more than an ingenious strategy; it was also an

[www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/workplace-fairness/fair-pay/african-american-women-wage-gap.pdf](http://www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/workplace-fairness/fair-pay/african-american-women-wage-gap.pdf), accessed January 2018.

13 Louise Daniel Hutchinson, *Anna J. Cooper: A Voice from the South* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), 93. See also James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

14 Immanuel Ness and Zak Cope, eds. *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 908.

15 Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), ii. Hereafter cited as Cooper, *VFS*.

16 May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist*, 3.

17 Peter McFaren and Colin Lankshear, *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 146.

important epistemic assertion, conjoining Cooper's voice with other silenced or muted ones and affirming their shared humanity. Voicing the concerns of other black women was in effect an important act of solidarity, aligning Cooper's fate with a generation of women whose humanity had been exploited and then silenced by a legacy of white supremacy. This shared sense of lived (embodied) experience often invigorates Cooper's philosophic writings, activism, and pious discourse. For example, when addressing the 1893 World's Congress of Representative Women in Chicago—a forum attended by women around the globe—Cooper gave voice to the resiliency of black women in the US since slavery, declaring that “the colored women's oppression in this country” and “her yet unwritten history is full with heroic struggle, struggle against fearful and overwhelming odds.”<sup>18</sup> Strategically conjoining the personal and the collective, Cooper also acknowledges speaking for women of the South (the poorest and least visible) because “it is there that the millions of blacks in this country have watered the soil with blood and tears.”<sup>19</sup>

These examples support my contention that Cooper's theories were not just abstract ideas; they emerged out of her embodied experience as a black woman, scholar, and activist whose own full humanity was questioned. May suggests that Cooper negotiated at least two worlds at once in her published texts and life: “an ideal world in which her personhood would not be questioned and, simultaneously, lived reality in which she had to contest daily the weight of being perceived and treated as ‘other.’”<sup>20</sup> Thus Cooper's precarious (and unique) voice as a black public intellectual sheds light on the misogynist and racial injustices that structured American life during her time.<sup>21</sup> Shirley Moody-Turner has recently illuminated Cooper's experience with the print industry of her day, which was the major medium by which authors could disseminate their work. Moody-Turner discusses the various gendered and class dynamics that adversely inflected Cooper's attempts to secure adequate publication outlets for her work as a black woman author.<sup>22</sup> In this context, the multivalent richness of Cooper's public intellectual

18 Anna Julia Cooper, “The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation,” in *The World's Congress of Representative Women: A Historical Resume*, ed. May Wright Sewell (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1894), 711. The World's Congress of Representative Women opened on May 15, 1893, drawing 500 delegates from 27 countries and 126 organizations.

19 Cooper, “Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women,” 712.

20 May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist*, 79–82.

21 Katherine Shilton, “Letter from Anna Julia Cooper to Alfred Churchill,” in “‘This Scholarly and Colored Alumna’: Anna Julia Cooper's Troubled Relationship with Oberlin College,” accessed March 2020, <http://www2.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/History322/AnnaJuliaCooper/AnnaJuliaCooper.htm>; May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist*, 34, 80–82; Mary Helen Washington, introduction to Cooper, *VFS*, xxxix.

22 Shirley Moody-Turner, “‘Dear Doctor Du Bois’: Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Gender Politics of Black Publishing,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 47–48.

“voice” in conjoining the one and the many is significant, as this insight from Moody-Turner suggests: “Cooper’s expansive concept of black publishing was part and parcel of an activist platform that could build and support black arts and education, dispute and debate racist propaganda, introduce important positive images by African Americans, expand the knowledge base of African American readers by introducing important international and domestic scholarship to its readership, and serve as a space for democratic dialogue and critical debate.”<sup>23</sup>

The problematic racial, gender, and class distinctions Cooper witnessed and experienced were distortions of the relational whole she imagined to be true for humans. In the next section I offer a brief discussion of Cooper’s conception of humanity, which provides the theoretical underpinnings of her egalitarian principles. This formulation of an expansive humanity will also invigorate Cooper’s vision of America as the stage on which the “principles of true democracy are founded in universal reciprocity” and advanced as the nation matures.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. Cooper’s Vision of Humanity and Her Politics of Relationality

Cooper never fully developed a systematic philosophical anthropology in any single work, but she does offer within select essays consistent characterizations of humans as evolving, perfecting, and maturing processes. In “The Gain from a Belief,” Cooper uses processional imagery for human life to challenge the skepticism and positivism of various European philosophers who saw humanity as nothing more than a conglomeration of cells best explained by scientific empiricism. Cooper rejects this reductive materialism in favor of a loftier view of humanity, or a “sublime conception of life as the seed-time of character for the growing of a congenial inner-self to be forever a constant conscious presence.”<sup>25</sup> In “What Are We Worth?” Cooper describes black Americans as dynamic, malleable entities capable of transformative growth, contingent on society’s provision of the proper conditions and forms of cultivation for its maturation: “It is labor, development, training, careful, patient, diligent toil that must span the gulf between this vegetating life germ (now worth nothing but toil and care and trouble, and living purely at the expense of another)—and that future consummation in which ‘the elements are so mixed that Nature can stand up and say to all the world, *‘This is a man.’*”<sup>26</sup>

Employing naturalistic metaphors alongside religious ones, Cooper characterized humans as evolving beings with the inner determination to fulfill themselves. In doing so, she contributed to a discourse of human perfectibility that was also found in the influential writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other nineteenth-century visionaries. In Emerson’s transcendentalist writings, human perfection-

23 Moody-Turner, “Dear Doctor Du Bois,” 48.

24 Cooper, *VFS*, 168.

25 Cooper, *VFS*, 295.

26 Cooper, *VFS*, 244.

ism is sometimes expressed as the latent capacities within each individual and their potential directedness.<sup>27</sup> His theme of infinite perfectibility was integrally connected to a general philosophic orientation that saw no discontinuity between perceived distinct worlds—for Emerson, the divine and the human were one, as expressed eloquently in his essay “The Over-Soul.”<sup>28</sup> Equally important, Emerson believed that a commitment to the truth of the divine within naturally leads one to exercise that commitment in relation to issues of social justice.

Cooper’s brand of perfectionism (or her sense of an inner directionality operating within humans and all natural processes) conjoined individual, national, and universal aspirations within the context of multiple oppressions in the United States. The measure of human progress for Cooper was how well “each and every” American could live in the absence of unjust racial, gender, class prejudices, and other expressions of xenophobia and cultural imperialism.<sup>29</sup> This perspective emerges from her black feminist slant (or intersectional approach) to the theme of one and all, and as I have observed elsewhere, this whiff of American Romanticism in Cooper distinguishes her voice from those of Emerson and other white visionaries.<sup>30</sup>

In my reading, Cooper’s black feminist and Romanticist expression of human potential also does not fall neatly within the human perfectibility and moral reform framework that Erica Bell explores in *To Live an Antislavery Life*. In this study, Bell explores the writings of select freed northern black leaders who, in the aftermath of slavery, advanced a politics of respectability that thematized inner moral (or divine) truth and outward action. Bell features black antebellum figures like Maria Stewart, David Walker, and others who ingeniously intertwined a rhetoric of self-improvement with a larger politics of racial uplift and freedom struggle. As she writes: “Every example of black self-actualization, virtue, morality, respectability, and success, they thought, would be a boon to the antislavery cause.”<sup>31</sup>

27 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 229.

28 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 386. See also *Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams (Cambridge, MA: Belknap / Harvard University, 1964), 2:1836–38; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Young Emerson Speaks: Unpublished Discourses on Many Subjects*, ed. Arthur Cushman McGiffert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938; repr. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1965), 200.

29 Cooper, *VFS*, 118;124–25.

30 Carol Wayne White, *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016): 60.

31 Erica Bell, *To Live an Antislavery Life* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 35. Bell aims to address some key assumptions of the available scholarly literature on the personal politics of respectability associated with the antebellum black middle class. A chief concern for Bell are certain dichotomies (respectability versus activism and elevation versus black nationalism) that scholars maintain in having uncritical views of the American Moral Reform Society (AMRS), which many black middle-class leaders participated in at the time. Bell clarifies her position, contending that this politics of respectability is “best understood as a value at the heart of the



Cooper's expressions of human perfectionism, inclusive in her style of writing, sense of national aspirations, and overall Romanticist outlook, have made her susceptible to the charges of class elitism and conservative politics that Bell addresses in her study.<sup>32</sup> Yet a close reading of Cooper's essays suggests otherwise, as she often and consistently exposed the dangers of "respectability politics" and elitist values. Consider, for example, that in "The Gain from A Belief" she admonishes her successful black (male) peers not to spend time discussing the "'Negro Problem' amid the clouds of your fine havanna, ensconced in your friend's well-cushioned arm-chair and with your patent leather boot-tips elevated to the opposite mantel."<sup>33</sup> She then encourages them to do something about the problem. What I am suggesting in this brief assessment is that Cooper's multifaceted approach to human perfectionism is hard to pin down. In short, Cooper's approach to the general theme of human progress in the nineteenth century does not belong properly to the white paradigmatic expressions associated with Emerson or to a variation of this theme that was exemplified by the middle-class blacks that Bell explores in her study.<sup>34</sup>

What is clear is that with processual imagery, Cooper consistently depicts a dynamic quality to human life that helps to dismantle problematic constructions of the human aligned with racist and sexist ideologies. She suggests that various inequalities are ill-informed social constructions which are not inherent to the natural strivings and agential activities within all humans. For example, Cooper confronted a shared notion among many white southern women that efforts to secure the rights of blacks in society ran against the *natural* order of things. In response, Cooper argued that the desire for self-fulfillment expressed by US blacks and other marginalized groups (as well as their efforts to humanize their material existence) were cultural manifestations of a higher truth that must not be stifled.<sup>35</sup> With a strong feminist voice, Cooper encouraged black women and men to seek self-fulfillment and actualize their humanity, as advocated by the women's movement, which she described as "a great and international movement characteristic of this age and country, a movement based on the inherent right of every soul to its highest development."<sup>36</sup> Such ontological aspirations, Cooper

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culture of the emerging black middle class: essential to the self-conception and personal identity of its members, their idealization of family life, their belief in the importance of gender-specific notions of virtue and independence, and ultimately their determination to live and die in a way that was utterly antithetical to the life deemed appropriate for them by slavery's supporters" (8).

32 May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist*, 57–71.

33 Cooper, *VFS*, 299–100.

34 For other perspectives that suggest Cooper possesses a unique voice, see Lewis Gordon's discussion of Cooper's exploration of existential ontological inquiries in *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*, *Africana Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Gordon also discusses the significance of Cooper's nineteenth-century feminist reflections in *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, *Cambridge Introductions to Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

35 Cooper, *VFS*, 113.

36 Cooper, *VFS*, 108.

argues, are common to all: “the one ideal of perfect manhood and womanhood, the one universal longing for development and growth, the one desire for being, and being better, the one yearning, aspiring, outreaching, in all heartthrobs of humanity in whatever race or clime.”<sup>37</sup>

Although she readily critiqued the racist sentiments of southern white women and subtle hypocrisy of white feminists, Cooper still envisioned the women’s movement as a transformative process in America that could help regenerate its life, politics, and culture. The promise the movement held for Cooper was its role in creating a network of social interactions that inspired and enabled each person to attain fullness of being and to flourish as part of the whole:

For women’s cause is the cause of the weak; and when all the weak shall have received their due consideration, then woman will have her “rights,” and the Indian will have his rights, and the Negro will have his rights, and all the strong will have learned at last to deal justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly; and our fair land will have been taught the secret of universal courtesy which is after all nothing but the art, the science, and the religion of regarding one’s neighbor as one’s self.<sup>38</sup>

Cooper’s conception of human life as the emergence from a greater matrix of natural forces, and with the potential to self-actualize, compelled her to identify the problematic distortions of racial differentiations based on standards of superiority and inferiority. In “What Are We Worth?” she identifies the insidious forms of “negrophobia” that kept white Americans entrapped in self-delusions of superiority.<sup>39</sup> In the beginning of this essay she sums up this antiblack sentiment in a remark ascribed anecdotally to Henry Ward Beecher: “Were Africa and the Africans to sink to-morrow, how much poorer would the world be? A little less gold and ivory, a little less coffee, a considerable ripple, perhaps, where the Atlantic and Indian oceans would come together—that is all; not a poem, not an invention, not a piece of art would be missed from the world.”<sup>40</sup> With this observation, Cooper targeted deficient conceptions of black humanity as debased, thereby confronting the enduring legacy of white supremacy in an Euro-American lineage of thought that has helped shape an exclusionary category of the human. The theme of a degraded black humanity that Cooper addressed has resonated deeply with a host of black American political theorists, writers, philosophers, and artists—both before and after Cooper—who have resisted its claims as well as the white supremacy ideology in which it is rooted. Her critical discourse about black lives in America is a crucial part of an African American intellectual trajectory that includes Frederick Douglass, who made the following observation in the nineteenth century when addressing the National Colored Convention of 1853: “Our white fellow-country

37 Cooper, *VFS*, 113.

38 Cooper, *VFS*, 117.

39 Cooper, *VFS*, 285.

40 Cooper, *VFS*, 228.

men do not know us. They are strangers to our character, ignorant of our capacity, oblivious of our history and progress, and are misinformed as to the principles and ideas that control and guide us as a people. The great mass of American citizens estimate us as an characterless and purposeless people.”<sup>41</sup> Douglass’s observations about the ideology of white supremacy—what he elsewhere labels the “diseased imagination”<sup>42</sup>—also anticipate James Baldwin’s astute observation, written fifty-some years after Cooper:

But this cowardice, this necessity of justifying a totally false identity and of justifying what must be called a genocidal history, has placed everyone now living into the hands of the most ignorant and powerful people the world has ever seen. And how did they get that way? By deciding that they were white. By opting for safety instead of life. By persuading themselves that a black child’s life meant nothing compared with a white child’s life. . . . By informing their children that black women, black men, and black children had no human integrity that those who call themselves white were bound to respect. And in this debasement and definition of black people, debased and defined themselves.<sup>43</sup>

This trajectory of critical racial discourse initiated by Cooper, Douglass, and Baldwin also anticipates later philosophical critiques of modernist processes of racialization that have repeatedly characterized people of African descent as deficient when measured against the construction of the normative Western human of Enlightenment thought.<sup>44</sup> It is in this wider context that I believe Cooper’s conceptualization of an expansive, emancipated humanity achieves its political force. With Douglass and Baldwin, Cooper not only resists the dominant notion of a deficient black humanity but also draws attention to the failures of whites who are simply unable to comprehend the true character and value of black folk. In one instance, she mocks the actions of white reformers who purport to help while speaking of “Negro depravity” in southern states, as well as the “stupendous and atrocious mistake of reasoning about these people as if they were just ordinary humans beings.”<sup>45</sup> In “The Negro as Represented in American Literature,” Cooper also targets the works of white writers and intellectuals who purport to address the “Negro question” with inauthentic descriptions and problematic images of blacks.

41 Frederick Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor, Library of Black America Series (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2000), 269.

42 Frederick Douglass, “The Color Line” (1881), in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, ed. J. Stauffer (New York: Penguin Classics, 2016), 501.

43 James Baldwin, “On Being White and Other Lies,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. and trans. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2010), 168.

44 Emanuel Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996); Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); J. Stefancic and R. Delgado, eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

45 Cooper, *VFS*, 107.

For Cooper, these writers failed to see their own biases and implicit sense of superiority when depicting blacks in a wide range of stereotypes ranging from the submissive Uncle Tom to the savage, vindictive predator. Rejecting these caricatures and misrepresentations as manifestations of a fearful white consciousness, Cooper astutely reveals the power dynamics that are operative when one race attempts to describe the truths and lived experiences of another. She concludes that “an authentic portrait, at once aesthetic and true to life, presenting the Black man as a free American citizen, not just the humble slave of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—but the *man*, divinely struggling and aspiring yet tragically warped and distorted by the adverse winds of circumstance, has not yet been painted. It is my opinion that the canvas awaits the brush of the colored man himself.”<sup>46</sup>

During her time, and in keeping with her evolutionary imagery, Cooper believed an evolved humanity necessitated the elimination of these distorted views of black humanity, anticipating a future epoch when “as sure as time *is*—*these mists will clear away*. And the world—our world, will surely and unerringly see us as we are. Our only care need be the intrinsic worth of our contributions. . . . and if we contribute a positive value in those things the world prizes, no amount of negrophobia can ultimately prevent its recognition. And our great ‘problem’ after all is to be solved not by brooding over it, and orating about it, but by *living into it*.”<sup>47</sup> For Cooper, negrophobia or racial prejudice within the American context was mere “sentiment governed by the association of ideas” and was essentially “impervious to reason.”<sup>48</sup> She thus encouraged blacks to focus more on “the intrinsic worth of our contributions” as humans and to not become too preoccupied with such “short sighted idiosyncracies,” which are ever shifting and unreliable in estimating one’s full value as a human being participating in the formation of a just world for all.<sup>49</sup>

Practicing transformation was not just the responsibility of blacks and other marginalized groups, as Cooper believed the nation and its leaders had a pivotal role to play in this process. Opposing the sterile, formulaic views of justice expressed by some white reformers, Cooper believed that transformation of society is primarily enacted through active participation in community organizing, grassroots activism, and myriad educational institutions, all of which aim at the systemic, conscious cultivation of free humans who can then participate fully in the formation of justice.<sup>50</sup> In making this observation, I return briefly to the perfectionism theme in Cooper’s philosophical anthropology, as I think her human

46 Anna Julia Cooper, “The Negro in American Literature,” in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 158. Hereafter cited as Cooper, *Voice of AJC*.

47 Cooper, *VFS*, 284–5.

48 Cooper, *VFS*, 231, 232.

49 Cooper, *VFS*, 284.

50 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 297.

progress discourse harbors a pragmatic orientation, or, better yet, a praxis that sought to conjoin thought and action in the midst of radical antiblack realities and the fact of interlocking multiple oppressions in America. While she envisioned a universal human nature that was structured to move in a positive direction, Cooper also relentlessly advocated for radical changes in society. With the latter, she also emphasized the role of choice, access to education, and development of a will within individuals that would allow them to become fully human, or their best selves. Note that in “What Are We Worth?” Cooper evokes the lofty ideals of American democracy and its aims in ensuring universal education and freedom for all in order to ask a rhetorical question: What kind of human, in actuality, does the nation produce with its actions, policies, and laws? Cooper eloquently responds that she is not so much impressed with the ideations put forth by the nation’s institutions as keen to see the results of their actions: “I shall not try to test your logic but weigh your results—and that test is the *measure of the stature of the fullness of a man*.”<sup>51</sup>

In certain essays Cooper encourages her readers to reenvision the human as an important finite realm (or perhaps as constituting a unique value-laden matrix) of potentiality within the unfolding of infinite cosmic possibilities.<sup>52</sup> This sets the stage for her development of a religious social ethic that centers on a critical awareness of racial oppression, as well as other forms. Cooper evokes a moral imagination linked to the historical figure of Jesus, whom she describes as follows: “Jesus *believed* in the infinite possibilities of an individual soul. His faith was . . . an optimistic vision of the human aptitude for endless expansion and perfectibility. This truth to him placed a sublime valuation on each individual sentience. . . . He could not lay hold of this truth and allow his own benevolence to be narrowed and distorted by the trickeries of circumstance or the colorings of prejudice.”<sup>53</sup> With this portrayal of Jesus, Cooper formulates a religious ethics intent on honoring the value of all humans and challenging ill-conceived racial distinctions. This image of Jesus’s capacious humanistic ethics provides an antidote to the hypocrisy Cooper often identified with the dominant white Christian practices of her day. In “The Ethics of the Negro Question” (1902), Cooper asserts that the Negro “stands in the United States of America today as the passive and silent rebuke to the Nation’s Christianity, the great gulf between its professions and its practices, furnishing the chief ethical element in its politics,” pointing a finger at the so-called ideals of our civilization.<sup>54</sup> She makes another reference to this lack of Christian integrity in “The Negro in American Literature” (1892), asserting that the notion of caste based on color is “a scathing rebuke to weak-eyed Christians who cannot read the golden rule across the color line.”<sup>55</sup> Rather than focus on nar-

51 Cooper, *VFS*, 283.

52 Cooper, *VFS*, 244, 258, 297.

53 Cooper, *VFS*, 298.

54 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 206.

55 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 145.

row moralistic precepts or abstract standards of virtue, Cooper asserts that “life must be something more than dilettante speculation. And religion (ought to be if it isn’t) a great deal more than mere gratification of the instinct for worship linked with the straight-teaching of irreproachable credos. Religion must be *life made true*, and life is action, growth, development—begun now and ending never.”<sup>56</sup>

Cooper participated in many social justice programs aimed at helping the marginalized secure the means to live humanly and with dignity. In her small pamphlet *The Social Settlement: What It Is and What It Does* (1913), Cooper reviews the history of the social settlement movement, arguing that its mission is driven by the conviction that all humans are “created with the divine right to a chance, and sets about hammering down some of those hideous handicaps which hamper whole sections of a community through the inequalities of environment, or the greed of the great.”<sup>57</sup> This principle applied equally to the effects of structural inequality on young blacks. She asserts: “It is to the interest of every man, woman, and child in Washington that each child here, the least important in our reckoning as well as the most important, shall have the chance to develop into serviceable citizenship.”<sup>58</sup>

In her 2007 study, May suggests that Cooper aimed to disrupt her contemporaries’ confidence in naive or myopic notions of democracy, redefining them by exposing the role of exploitation and violence endemic to specific histories and hypotheses about democracies, both abroad and at home.<sup>59</sup> I agree with this assessment. In “Equality of Races and the Democratic Movement” (1925), Cooper ingeniously juxtaposes the tenets of those proud “Christian” nations that “adore the principles of Democracy, of Equality, of fraternity, who, among their congeners practice the noblest philanthropies, statesmen, philosophers, literati, preachers, teachers of the finest, most exalted ideas” with their practices as soon as race enters the scenario.<sup>60</sup> The contrast is startling, she muses. In the same essay Cooper tackles the theory proposed by the French thinker Célestin Bouglé about the origin and growth of democracy. She is indignant when reading his assertion in *Les idées égalitaires* that equality manifests itself only in Western cultures, or more specifically in Anglo-Saxon cultures.<sup>61</sup> For Cooper, not only does his theory reinscribe the false notion of racial superiority, but it remains an empty abstraction. With her unique religious-ethical sensibilities, Cooper writes: “A better hypothesis it seems to me, would be the postulate that progress in the democratic sense is an inborn human endowment—a shadow mark of the Creator’s image, or if you will an urge-cell, the universal and unmistakable hall-mark,” which she later speaks of as a divine spark within every human.<sup>62</sup>

56 Cooper, *VFS*, 298–99.

57 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 217.

58 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 222.

59 May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist*, 99.

60 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 296.

61 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 291.

62 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 293.

Evoking this divine spark was yet another creative way for Cooper to reiterate her theme of a shared humanity, expressed variously as the interplay of one and all. For Cooper, in the final analysis, the concept of equality is not about special treatment for some; nor is it a set of lofty abstract standards that certain peoples or cultures claim as their invention. Equality is an enactment of a basic truth or principle regarding humanity's essential nature, and its manifestation should be evident in each and every human. As she writes, "The concept of Equality as it is the genuine product of the idea of the inherent value in the individual derived from the essential worth of Humanity must be before all else unquestionably of universal application. It operates not between such and such places,—such or such shape of the cranium, such and such theories of civilization."<sup>63</sup> For Cooper, equality is an ideal or objective value that is achieved under certain circumstances; it becomes manifest when those "with all the power and all the controls" stop to consider that the other (or the powerless) is "as good as I am. Both human, both mortal, both entitled to a place in the sun."<sup>64</sup> When that important condition is met, Cooper asserts, then all earnest citizens embracing the vision of a shared yet variegated humanity can contribute their best efforts toward the common good. In the final analysis, then, equality for Cooper is something that societies achieve only when each individual is treated as a full, valuable human with her own uniqueness, so that all may offer their best gifts toward the shared goal of maintaining "harmony in variety."<sup>65</sup>

In a different essay, Cooper targets Western visionaries who imposed a distorted historical consciousness upon the current Western age as the supreme achievement of past eras, portraying Western (white) peoples as superior races with dominant cultures surpassing other ones. She cites Percival Lowell's remarks in *Soul of the Far East* (1888): "As for Far Orientals, they are not of those who will survive. . . . If these people continue in their old course, their early career is closed. Just as surely as morning passes into afternoon, so surely are these races of the Far East, if unchanged, destined to disappear before the advancing nations of the West."<sup>66</sup> In this quotation Cooper detected the same triumphalist and xenophobic spirit that was at work in America's justification of slavery and its treatment of African Americans. She thus responded in a spirited manner: "A spectacle to make the gods laugh, truly, to see the scion of an upstart race by one sweep of his generalizing pen consigning to annihilation one-third of the inhabitants of the globe—a people whose civilization was hoary headed before the partner elements that begot his race had advanced beyond nebulosity."<sup>67</sup>

Closer to home, within American culture, Cooper exhorts other black lead-

63 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 297.

64 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 297.

65 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 298.

66 Cooper, *VFS*, 52.

67 Cooper, *VFS*, 52.

ers not to erect new norms and classifications that denigrate certain “blacks” as less important than others. In an address to the affluent black male clergy of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Washington, DC, in 1886, she denounces the isolationist ambitions of some black leaders who “exhaust their genius splitting hairs on aristocratic distinctions and thanking God they are not as others.”<sup>68</sup> Cooper’s point is clear: people of color already marginalized by the edifice of white supremacy should be aware of a politics of respectability in which the poor, underclass, and uneducated were deemed less invaluable. With her capacious view of humanity, Cooper urged each member to see the purported “other” as oneself. Pragmatically, this meant that in order for all community dwellers to flourish, the needs of everyone must be acknowledged and met. Consequently, Cooper exhorts the audience to help those who are most vulnerable to the vicissitudes of slavery and its aftermath—that is, the least part of the whole: poor southern black women. She believed that those who have material prosperity must continue a process of giving back—helping the least because they are an essential part of the whole.

For Cooper, another important mechanism for securing an emancipatory humanity is access to quality education for all. As Lloyd notes in his work, in response to a written question about her views of education, Cooper replied: “I have always stood for that Education that aims at the making of Men rather than the constructing of machines. If the Negro is a man then what is good for Man, in all its age-old and infinite varieties, is good for him. Why should he be cabined and cribbed with just this or that for his mental pabulum?”<sup>69</sup> Cooper exposed racist ideologies as cultural forms of violence that denied black growth, creativity, and potential productivity. In short, they were antithetical to black life’s inherent desire to thrive.

In “The Status of Woman in America,” Cooper emphasizes the necessity of developing black creativity and securing emancipation from stifling and stagnant forces that thwart self-actualization. In so doing Cooper speaks of the latent potential within black America, which she describes as “young and full of the elasticity and hopefulness of youth. All its achievements are before it.”<sup>70</sup> With this vision Cooper also associates “genius” with blackness, evoking a type of natural capacity that can be developed and advanced with proper nurturing. She cites the words of an anonymous European writer: “Except the Slavonic, the Negro is the only original and distinctive genius which has yet to come to growth—and the feeling is to cherish and develop it.”<sup>71</sup> Here Cooper indicates to her peers that the cultivation of black life and its vital forces cohered both with the natural order of things and with national and universal transformation. Moreover, Cooper’s use of *genius* reflects her desire to celebrate the richness of black culture’s vitality, creativity, and

68 Cooper, *VFS*, 33.

69 Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*, 164n15.

70 Cooper, *VFS*, 144.

71 Cooper, *VFS*, 144.



power at an important juncture in its history; indeed “the memory of past oppression and the fact of present attempted repression only serve to gather momentum for its irrepressible powers.”<sup>72</sup> Cooper champions a vital construction of African Americans’ full, complex humanity that has been consistently embattled by the impoverished notion that black bodies are useful only as enslaved forms of menial labor in a culture dominated by the ideology of white supremacy.

In “On Education” (1930), a lesser-known essay, Cooper describes the role education plays in achieving cultural excellence as well as self-determination in black Americans, as it does in all humans: “The only sane education, therefore, is that which conserves the very lowest stratum, the best and most economical is that which gives to each individual, according to his capacity, that training of ‘head, hand and heart,’ or, more literally, of mind, body and spirit which converts him into a beneficent force in the service of the world. This is the business of schools and this the true cause of the deep and vital interest of all the people in Educational Programs.”<sup>73</sup> It is noteworthy that Cooper references the contributions of Aristotle and other theorists for their development of the liberal arts, which she argues have been universally accepted by teachers as a reasonable and proper basis for the education of humanity.<sup>74</sup> In keeping with her sense of equality for all, not just the elite few, Cooper also advocates for the education of domestic workers, which she argues will accelerate their professionalism and offer them opportunities to dignify their lives, as do other professions.<sup>75</sup> With such educational advocacy, Cooper was intent on creating a nation that enabled and inspired all of its members to become creative free agents with the power to influence the world in some way or to some degree.

### 3. Cooper’s Vision for America

Cooper expresses her hope for an emancipated humanity in her conception of America as an unfolding cultural sphere where “regenerating” and “vitalizing” forces were at work—a “relational whole” advancing in growth and perfection for all its constituents.<sup>76</sup> She indicates this vision succinctly in “Has America a Race Problem; If So, How Can It Best Be Solved?,” describing the potential for America to be the arena where the voice (or interest) of each and all would be heard and acknowledged.<sup>77</sup> In this dream, America is the scene where “the last death struggle of political tyranny, of religious bigotry, of caste illiberality and class exclusiveness”

<sup>72</sup> Cooper, *VFS*, 145.

<sup>73</sup> Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 250. The date for this piece is not exactly known. Lemert suggests it is a talk that Cooper probably delivered during her tenure as president of Frelinghuysen University, sometime during the mid-1930s.

<sup>74</sup> Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 252.

<sup>75</sup> Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 255.

<sup>76</sup> Cooper, *VFS*, 12, 18, 21, 26, 29.

<sup>77</sup> Cooper, *VFS*, 166.

is necessary as the country transforms itself into a true democracy.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, for Cooper, America would enter the world stage as a nation where efforts to eradicate the monstrosity of “race prejudice” are visible, where people learn that “a race, as a family, may be true to itself without seeking to exterminate others,” and where the “principles of true democracy are founded in universal reciprocity.”<sup>79</sup>

At the same time, Cooper wisely notes that such ideals could only materialize once the unjust interlocking forms of oppression structuring American life were adequately addressed. In other words, into this idealized vision of America Cooper interjects a sobering realism. The nation that she and many others experienced on a daily was one dominated by violent ideologies: “America for Americans! This is the white man’s country! The Chinese must go, shrieks the exclusionist. Exclude the Italians! Colonize the blacks in Mexico or deport them to Africa. Lynch, suppress, drive out, kill out! America for Americans!”<sup>80</sup> These sentiments ran counter to Cooper’s comprehension of humanity’s radical relationality. Her politics of one and all conveyed, in a profound sense, that belonging together in right relationship is a fundamental characteristic of human life—in short, it tells us something important about who we are and how we ought to live our lives. Cooper’s politics of radical relationality was grounded in a general conception of humanity where each human constitutes part of an interacting, evolving, and genetically related community of beings bound together inseparably in space and time. Accordingly, with this communal ontology, Cooper’s sense of right relationships encompassed genuine encounters between and among individuals, as well as between diverse groups, in which each person’s full humanity was consciously acknowledged and honored.<sup>81</sup>

In *Process and Faith*, social ethicist Douglas Sturm articulates an important insight that seems to be operative in Cooper’s politics of relationality: “That we belong to one another is a way of affirming, in the language of philosophy, the principle of internal relations. According to that principle, what we are is made up of a host of entangling and ever-changing relationships, all of which leave their traces on our life from its beginning to its end. At the same time, we are, within the context of those relationships, creative agents, making a difference, great or small, in the lives of others in the immediate present and in the long-range future.”<sup>82</sup> Cooper was convinced that those who genuinely understand that we belong to one another tend to act in distinctive ways, such as helping the most vulnerable and promoting justice for all, not just a few.<sup>83</sup>

78 Cooper, *VFS*, 168.

79 Cooper, *VFS*, 168.

80 Cooper, *VFS*, 163.

81 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 108, 204, 339.

82 Douglas Sturm, *Belonging Together: Faith and Politics in a Relational World* (Claremont, CA: P&F Press, 2003), 5.

83 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 205.

She resisted a politics of self-interest built primarily on a doctrine of individual rights in favor of a politics of participatory citizenship, where individual rights are empowered or enabled to experience fulfillment within an encompassing community of mutually interdependent citizens. As she noted at one point when making crucial connections between various forms of prejudice, “The philosophic mind sees that its own ‘rights’ are the rights of humanity.”<sup>84</sup> For Cooper, a robust America thrived on this principle, not on the manufacturing of inequalities and social hierarchies. Specifically, if any part was held back, then the whole was diminished. With this general outlook, Cooper insisted that unless, and until, black women and men (and other marginalized groups) could prosper and participate fully in the rich unfolding of America, it would not actualize itself.

Achieving this goal, Cooper suggests, involves an interplay of forces and conflict in which diversity and inclusion become standard.<sup>85</sup> With this perspective, Cooper describes a type of participatory citizenship where each distinguishable part has a crucial role to play in furthering the interest of the whole. As she observes, “Exclusiveness and selfishness in a family, in a community, or in a nation is suicidal to progress. Caste and prejudice mean immobility.”<sup>86</sup> Cooper then suggests that in advancing and securing democratic ideals, one law holds fast: “In sociology as in the world of matter, *that equilibrium, not repression among conflicting forces is the condition of natural harmony, of permanent progress, and of universal freedom.*”<sup>87</sup> With this appeal to natural processes, Cooper suggests the nation’s growth will involve inevitable conflict as it evolves toward sustaining a rich, civilized culture of celebrating differences. Cooper views conflict as stimulating, progressive, and healthy when it is produced through “the co-existence of radically opposing or racially different elements” and where the general ethos is “the determination to live and let live.”<sup>88</sup>

In “My Racial Philosophy,” Cooper speaks much more realistically of the struggles and vulnerabilities that beset black female cultural workers seeking radical transformation of America, declaring, “The whips and stings of prejudice, whether of color or sex, find me neither too calloused to suffer, nor too ignorant to know what is due me.”<sup>89</sup> She also offers an astute understanding of the intricacies of cultural and physical violence in America, noting that one would be mistaken in “imagining that oppression goes only with color”: “When I encounter brutality I need not always charge it to my race.”<sup>90</sup> In calling attention to the everyday and institutionalized forms of violence in America, Cooper helps shed light

84 Cooper, *VFS*, 118.

85 Cooper, *VFS*, 159–60.

86 Cooper, *VFS*, 160.

87 Cooper, *VFS*, 160.

88 Cooper, *VFS*, 151, 149.

89 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 236.

90 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 236.

on the entrenched white supremacist ideology and its various permutations (sexism, class bias, xenophobia, etc.) that permeated the country. White supremacy's dominance and the struggles against it stand in stark contrast to older, healthier forms of conflict Cooper observes in the natural world.<sup>91</sup>

Finally, Cooper notes that struggle is an integral part of the life of the activist who refuses to be seduced by lofty abstractions or paralyzed by resentment. She writes: "To me, life has meant a big opportunity and I am thankful that my work has always been the sort that beckoned me on, leaving me no room for blasé philosophizing and rebellion's resentment and with just enough opposition to give zest to the struggle."<sup>92</sup> As she observed, the cultural violence maintained by prejudices is "chargeable to the imperfections in the civilization environing me for which as a teacher and a trained thinker I take my share of responsibility."<sup>93</sup> With this awareness she advances her politics of one and all toward the emancipation of humanity, encouraging others to do so as well.

91 Cooper, *VFS*, 150.

92 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 237.

93 Cooper, *Voice of AJC*, 236–37.

## 9: Ida B. Wells on Racial Criminalization

Naomi Murakawa

The *New York Times* did not publish an obituary for Ida B. Wells. But it did publish an obituary for lynching. “Lynching will be a lost crime by 1940,” declared the *New York Times* in 1930. After all, in 1929 lynch mobs murdered “only” ten people. As sure as the steady march of American progress, lynching was fated to become a curiosity for postmortem analysis, “something for scientists to study and the rest of us to remember with unbelief.”<sup>1</sup>

Lynching could “die” only if a definition fixed its shape, with contours etched like a corpse’s chalk outline. But antiblack violence is shape-shifting. The Tuskegee Institute convened a 1940 summit to settle lynching’s definition, and, working with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), set these terms: “There must be legal evidence that a person has been killed, and that he met his death illegally at the hands of a group acting under the pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition.”<sup>2</sup> But even the summit’s attendees soon rejected this definition. The NAACP found it too restrictive, because the requirement of group-based illegality excluded lynchings that had gone “underground,” quietly and efficiently carried out by one or two killers. By contrast, the ASWPL found it too expansive. Lynching, the ASWPL claimed, required signature features like large crowds and specific acts of brutality like immolation.<sup>3</sup>

Narrowly scripted understandings of extralegality and extraletality, like those embraced by the ASWPL and the *New York Times*, are prerequisites for tidy declarations of the end of lynching. In its most constrained sense, extralegality means that a group operating outside of official law enforcement performs the murder—that is, mob-based, community-supported violence exceeds what is properly

1 “Foresees End of Lynching,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1930, quoted in Ashraf Rushdy, *The End of American Lynching* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 95, 191.

2 Quoted in Rushdy, *End of American Lynching*, 97; Christopher Waldrep, “War of Words: The Controversy over the Definition of Lynching, 1899–1940,” *Journal of Southern History* 66 (February 2000): 75.

3 The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, a group of white women devoted to exposing lynchings’ chivalrous pretext and ending the bloodletting in their names, declared 1938 the year of the last lynching by mob-led burning. Rushdy, *End of American Lynching*, 95–102.

“legal.” What Lee Ann Fujii calls extraletality means that violence exceeds the physical requirements of murder and enters the realm of transgressive torture.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, extraletality and extraletality define lynching as a *sui generis* subspecies of racial violence—a peculiar form of mob-based vigilante murder replete with distinctly gruesome rituals like dismemberment, sexual torture, burning, and hanging. In short, lynching’s hegemonic definition conveniently matches a form of murder that peaked in the 1890s, declined through the 1920s, and “ended” with self-congratulatory eulogies delivered evermore.

“End-of-lynching discourse,” as Ashraf Rushdy explains, crescendoed in the 1940s and remains seductive, offering reassurance that we have overcome the murderous racism that belongs to a “bygone era.”<sup>5</sup> That is, lynching’s obituary is part of a nationalist ideological project to declare it a relic of the past with no relevance for understanding the present. Long-standing cultural logics continue to facilitate end-of-lynching discourse. As a “spectacular secret,” lynching was “secretly” integrated into the routines of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, and hence, in Jacqueline Goldsby’s words, the high death toll of black lynch victims could be “both shocking and ordinary, unexpected and predictable, fantastic and normal, horrifying and banal.” Contemporary “narrative molds”—the repetitions of “It’s a southern phenomenon” and “The rape myth is a lie”—keep lynching safely entombed.<sup>6</sup>

Ida B. Wells died on March 25, 1931. Eighty-seven years after her death, a 2018 *New York Times* special section titled “Overlooked” finally published Wells’s obituary.<sup>7</sup> Without pathbreaking black feminist scholarship since the late 1980s, Wells might have remained overlooked. Indeed, Hazel Carby’s 1987 book *Reconstructing Womanhood* intervened to correct scholarship that saw Wells as “a dwarf in relation to the giants of [W. E. B.] Du Bois and [Booker T.] Washington,” a leader without a movement whose life’s work amounted to “a limited success.”<sup>8</sup> With at least four major new Wells biographies published since 1990,<sup>9</sup> scholars have offered new analyses that locate Wells as a central theorist of black feminism, her insights as far-reaching as black feminism itself, relevant to understanding

4 Lee Ann Fujii, “The Puzzle of Extra-lethal Violence,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (June 2013): 410–26.

5 Rushdy, *End of American Lynching*, chap. 3.

6 Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 8, 16, 27. See also Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Parties Unknown: The Lynching of Black Americans* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), iii.

7 Caitlin Dickinson, “Ida B. Wells, 1862–1931,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2018, 4.

8 Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 108.

9 Mildred Thompson, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1990); Patricia Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett & American Reform 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Paula Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions* (New York: Amistad, 2008); Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

topics from sexual violence to contemporary debates about postracialism and reparations.

For all of her contributions over her sixty-eight years, however, Ida B. Wells is predominantly read as a late nineteenth-century antilynching crusader. Of course Wells was an antilynching crusader, but reading her *only* as this risks interpreting her through present-day and overly narrow conceptions of lynching. Popular compilations include the same trio of Wells's early work under the title *On Lynching*, reprinting *Southern Horrors* (1892), *A Red Record* (1895), and *Mob Rule in New Orleans* (1900).<sup>10</sup> Spotlighting Wells's early work familiarizes students with lynchings as cataloged in the 1890s. This selection freezes Wells in time, preserving her as a hero of the past, an early crusader against a particular form of racist murder that has largely been eclipsed by other forms of racist murder. Celebrating this portrait of a young Wells comes dangerously close to the ideological project behind end-of-lynching discourse; however unwittingly, we give our assent to the idea that lynching's power resides in its unique *form*—its extralegality and its extra-lethality, both narrowly defined—rather than its *function* as terror in the service of gendered and economic white domination.

By linking Wells's celebrated early work (1892–1900) with her relatively neglected later work (1917–20 and her posthumously published autobiography), and by calling on the brilliant secondary scholarship about Wells, this chapter interprets Ida B. Wells as a foundational thinker on racial criminalization. Racial criminalization, as Khalil Muhammad explains, is the stigmatization of crime as black and the simultaneous erasure of white violence and criminality in all its forms.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of her life, Wells documented white violence in many forms: murder at the hands of paramilitary Ku Klux Klan members, lynch mobs, police officers, and prison wardens; theft through sharecropping, mob looting, and criminal justice fees and fines; and sexual violence, especially white men's intertwined use of rape and lynching, both sanctioned by the criminal legal system. This continuum of white violence stretches into the present of mass surveillance and a US incarceration rate that remains the highest in the world, sustained by the

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, ed. Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); *On Lynchings: Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, ed. Patricia Hill Collins (Amherst, MA: Humanity Books, 2002); *On Lynchings* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2014); *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, and Mob Rule in New Orleans* (Salem, MA: Ayer, 1993). An additional limitation to theorizing the philosophy of Ida B. Wells is, as Brittney Cooper points out, the gendered and raced dimensions of terms like *intellectual*—and, I would add, *philosopher*—that curtail serious engagement with nineteenth- and twentieth-century black women theorists. Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Racial criminalization, Khalil Muhammad writes, is “the stigmatization of crime as ‘black’ and the masking of crime among whites as individual failure.” Khalil Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

perfectly legal and purportedly nonlethal routines of overpolicing black neighborhoods and black people. It is therefore the aim of this chapter to read Wells's political thought for lessons on how best to combat ongoing black criminalization.

**"It Is the White Man's Civilization and the White Man's Government Which Are on Trial"**

In her 1895 pamphlet *A Red Record*, Wells reflected on the role of social scientific quantification in legitimizing, or potentially delegitimizing, the logics of black criminalization. The full title, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States, 1892-1893-1894, Respectfully submitted to the Nineteenth Century Civilization in "the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave,"* announced a democratic approach to statistics, an invitation for all to review the record. In conversation with late nineteenth-century empiricism and notions of expertise, Wells instructed readers to disseminate the information and "let the facts speak for themselves, with you as a medium."<sup>12</sup> But Wells practiced a methodological sophistication that belies faith in self-evident facts.<sup>13</sup> To protect herself from "the charge of exaggeration," Wells counted only lynchings "vouched for" by the *Chicago Tribune*. "Out of their own mouths shall the murderers be condemned," she wrote.<sup>14</sup> She used this same journalistic tally in her 1892 pamphlet

<sup>12</sup> Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States, 1892-1893-1894, Respectfully Submitted to the Nineteenth Century Civilization in "the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave"* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1895), 97.

A note on sources: Image placement, format, and typesetting matter, and I therefore draw on scans of Wells's original pamphlets and sources that reproduced facsimiles of the originals. Unfortunately, some of these sources are obscure. Arno Press reproduced facsimiles of *Southern Horrors*, *A Red Record*, and *Mob Rule in New Orleans* from originals in the collection of Howard University Library; see Ida B. Wells, *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, and Mob Rule in New Orleans* (New York: Arno and the New York Times, 1969). For those three pamphlets, I cite the facsimiles reproduced by Arno, giving the original pamphlet citation. *The East St. Louis Massacre*, another pamphlet, is in the digital collection "Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925): The First World War, the Red Scare, and the Garvey Movement." *The Arkansas Race Riot* pamphlet is in the digital collection of the University of Louisville (<https://archive.org/details/TheArkansasRaceRiot>). Other Wells works are found in edited volumes and so noted in the citations that follow.

<sup>13</sup> Wells held a philosophy that suggested an even deeper critique of self-narrating "facts." Even if facts could speak, white listeners dismiss or reinterpret facts that challenge their political advantage and economic self-interest. True to the philosophy of agitation, Wells did not see white civilization as amenable to "moral suasion." Rather, Wells recognized that "the appeal to the white man's pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience." Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors, Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York: New York Age Print, 1892), 23; see Tommy Curry, "The Fortune of Wells: Ida B. Wells-Barnett's Use of T. Thomas Fortune's Philosophy of Racial Agitation as a Prolegomenon to Militant Civil Rights Activism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 48 (October 2012): 5, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Wells, *Red Record*, 15.



*Southern Horrors*, counting 728 black lynching victims from 1886 through 1892. *A Red Record* counted another 159 black lynching victims in 1893.<sup>15</sup>

In *A Red Record*, Wells confronted lynching as a part of the machinery of black criminalization. She recognized that lynching is “justified” with numbers about alleged black criminality, statistics laden with racist ideology. *A Red Record* was therefore methodologically self-reflexive: it dialectically used murder data while reflecting on its limits, and it noted black “innocence” while challenging the very notion that black people are on trial. Even Frederick Douglass’s one-page preface to *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record* reads like an ambivalent meditation on the power of numbers. On the one hand, Douglass praised Wells’s “cool, painstaking” presentation of statistics, so self-evidently persuasive that “those naked and uncontradicted facts . . . speak for themselves.” On the other hand, Douglass insisted that life and love are beyond quantification. Wells had done her people “a service which can neither be weighed nor measured,” Douglass wrote. Douglass even delivered this point performatively, using absurd fractional quantification to formulate the hypothesis: “If the American conscience were only half alive, if the American church and clergy were only half Christianized . . . [then] indignation would rise to Heaven wherever your pamphlet shall be read.”<sup>16</sup> Quantifying humanity is authoritative—and impossible.

Wells’s approach to data warrants close attention. The original source data for *A Red Record*, the *Chicago Tribune*, published a retrospective lynching calendar at the end of each year.<sup>17</sup> Organized by month, the *Tribune*’s “Judge Lynch’s Work” in 1893 listed each entry by date, name (if known), race (if other than white), alleged “reason” for lynching, and location:

#### JANUARY

- 3—Henry Duncan, murder, London, Tenn.
- 5—Albert Roberts, murder, Lowtown, Idaho
- 6—Unknown negro, murder, Pocket Township, N.C.
- 6—Paul Scroggs, colored, murder, Brinkley, Ark. . . .
- 26—Patrick Wells, colored, incendiarism, Quincy, Fla.<sup>18</sup>

In *A Red Record*’s “Chapter II: Lynch Law Statistics,” Wells transformed the *Tribune*’s data with two crucial modifications. First, she selected those entries “referring only to the colored victims of Lynch Law.” Second, she sorted the data by alleged crime of the lynch victim. By culling the *Tribune*’s data for black people

15 Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 14; Wells, *Red Record*, 15.

16 Frederick Douglass, preface [foreword] to *Red Record*, 5. This same prefatory message originally graced *Southern Horrors*, entered not as the preface but as a reprinted letter to Wells with the place/date stamp “Cedar Hill, Anacostia, D.C., October 25, 1892.”

17 Goldsby, *Spectacular Secret*, 87.

18 “Judge Lynch’s Work,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 31, 1893 (last edition).

only and then reorganizing by their alleged crime, Wells essentially transformed a calendar into a slate of criminal charges against black people:

**ARSON.**

Sept. 15, Paul Hill, Carrollton, Ala.; Sept. 15, Paul Archer, Carrollton, Ala.; Sept. 15, William Archer, Carrollton, Ala.; Sept. 15, Emma Fair, Carrollton, Ala.

**SUSPECTED ROBBERY.**

Dec. 23, unknown Negro, Fannin, Miss.

**ASSAULT.**

Dec. 25, Calvin Thomas, near Brainbridge, Ga.

**ATTEMPTED ASSAULT.**

Dec. 28, Tillman Green, Columbia, La.

**INCENDARISM.**

Jan. 26., Patrick Wells, Quincy, Fla. . . .<sup>19</sup>

Using centered typeset and capital letters, Wells reformatted the data as if to shout, “BLACK CRIME. Look. Do not turn away.” The “reason” for each lynching, taken verbatim from the *Tribune*, was named sometimes as allegation, sometimes as attempt, sometimes as if certain felony. Wells named them all: ATTEMPTED RAPE, BURGLARY, WIFE BEATING, ATTEMPTED MURDER, ATTEMPTED ROBBERY, RACE PREJUDICE, THIEVES, ALLEGED BARN BURNING, ALLEGED MURDER, ALLEGED COMPLICITY IN MURDER, MURDER, SELF DEFENSE, POISONING WELLS, ALLEGED WELL POISONING, INSULTING WHITES, MURDEROUS ASSAULT, NO OFFENSE, ALLEGED RAPE, ALLEGED STOCK POISONING, SUSPECTED MURDER, TURNING STATE’S EVIDENCE.<sup>20</sup> In short, Wells magnified white supremacy’s vision and represented it on the page: white supremacy sees not lynch victims but black criminals, mostly black rapists.

With this list of criminal indictments, Wells confronted black criminalization both explicitly with data analysis and implicitly with data visualization. In explicit terms, Wells used data aggregation to disconfirm the central pretext for lynching—that it is punishment for the crime of rape. Counting by categories of “offenses charged,” Wells concluded that “not one-third of the victims lynched were charged with rape, and further that the charges made embraced a range of offenses from murders to misdemeanors.”<sup>21</sup> Here, fastidious tallying con-

<sup>19</sup> Wells, *Red Record*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Wells, *Red Record*, 16–19.

<sup>21</sup> Wells, *Red Record*, 20.

firmed a famous sentence from her 1892 *Free Speech* editorial, subsequently re-quoted in a white newspaper as “loathsome and repulsive calumnies”: “Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread bare lie that negro men rape white women.”<sup>22</sup>

Wells thus used data analysis to challenge lynching on its own terms, effectively saying: rape is but a fraction of the allegations, therefore lynching has no consistent and hence coherent justification. But her fearless visual representation of data, I believe, delivered the more profound challenge, effectively saying: allegations of black criminality are loud distractions, because lynching has no justification.

Wells recognized that one tool of white supremacy is its inversion of predation: the victim is costumed as criminal, the criminal as victim. After her opening representation of alleged BLACK CRIME categories in chapter II, Wells structured *A Red Record*'s next three chapters with a new set of categorical headings. Rather than categorizing by victims' *alleged* crimes, Wells created chapter titles highlighting murderers' *actual* crimes: “Chapter III: Lynching Imbeciles,” “Chapter IV: Lynching Innocent Men,” “Chapter V: Lynched for Anything or Nothing.” As Jacqueline Goldsby's insightful analysis points out, these new categories set right-side-up the inversion of criminality. Wells traced twenty-one lynchings to their original news source, recounting graphic descriptions of torture to remind readers of the actuality of white violence.<sup>23</sup> Wells thereby used mixed methods that performed her complex message: aggregation made patterns knowable as patterns; simultaneously, there was the irreducible, nonquantifiable value of each murder victim.

In Wells's political thought, insisting on the innocence of black lynch victims only affirmed the default legitimacy of lynching. A “black innocence project” would merely concede that black people are perpetually on trial, stamped as “a race of rapists and desperadoes.”<sup>24</sup> As Wells wrote in *A Red Record*'s final chapter: “The Negro does not claim that all of the one thousand black men, women and children, who have been hanged, shot and burned alive during the past ten years, were innocent of the charges made against them.”<sup>25</sup> Several paragraphs later Wells reminds readers that lynch victims are not on trial; rather, “it is the white man's civilization and the white man's government which are on trial.”<sup>26</sup> Wells helped to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which from its 1909 creation through at least the 1930s made it a matter of policy to support and defend only those criminal defendants they believed to

22 Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 4.

23 Goldsby, *Spectacular Secret*, 87.

24 Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 15.

25 Wells, *Red Record*, 96.

26 Wells, *Red Record*, 98. As Curry explains, Wells's antilynching stance was a philosophical assault on the barbarism of white civilization. Curry, “Fortune of Wells,” 470.

be innocent of any crime.<sup>27</sup> But by 1892 Wells had already rejected black respectability and black innocence.<sup>28</sup>

Wells's radical rejection of innocence reposed on her historically informed understanding of discursive and recursive processes that conflate blackness and criminality. *A Red Record* situated contemporary white violence within a comprehensive history of white killing sprees since the abolition of slavery. Once again submitting "the statistics as gathered and preserved by white men," Wells wrote that more than ten thousand black men, women, and children had been killed in cold blood in the three decades since 1865. Citing Frederick Douglass's "Lessons of the Hour," *A Red Record* traced the construction of "three excuses" used as pretext for the mass murder of black people.<sup>29</sup>

In detailing these excuses, Wells illuminated three decades of white construction of black criminal threat. In the years immediately following the Civil War, from 1865 to 1872, hundreds of black men, women, and children were slaughtered under the first excuse, "the necessity of the white man to repress and stamp out alleged 'race riots.'" No black riots ever materialized, however, and "this story at last wore itself out."<sup>30</sup> After the enfranchisement of black men in 1870, the second excuse was white self-defense against the threat of "Negro domination." "The southern white man would not consider that the Negro had any right which a white man was bound to respect," explained Wells, reminding her readers of the resurrected grammar of the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision. Citing popular Democratic Party campaign slogans of the 1880s, Wells wrote of Reconstruction-era murderous pretenses. "It was maintained that 'This is a white man's government,' and regardless of numbers the white man should rule. 'No Negro Domination' became the new legend on the sanguinary banner of the sunny South, and under it rode the Ku Klux Klan, the Regulators, and the lawless mobs, which for any cause chose to murder one man or a dozen as suited their purpose best."<sup>31</sup> Such violence eviscerated black male voting rights and southern Republican governance, yet the brutality continued. "Negroes were whipped, scourged, exiled, shot and hung whenever and wherever it pleased the white man so to treat them, and as the civilized world with increasing persistency held the white people of the South to account for its outlawry, the murderers invented a third excuse—that Negroes had

27 Giddings, *Ida*, 571. Immediately after Alabama charged the nine "Scottsboro Boys" with raping two white women in 1931, Walter White attempted to assess their guilt or innocence before committing the NAACP to their defense. Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of "Brown v. Board of Education" and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 144–46. For an account of Wells's foundational but underappreciated role in compelling the NAACP to confront lynching, see Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), chap. 2.

28 Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 64; Curry, "Fortune of Wells."

29 Lawrie Balfour, "Ida B. Wells and 'Color Line Justice': Rethinking Reparations in Feminist Terms," *Perspectives on Politics* 13 (September 2015): 684.

30 Wells, *Red Record*, 8–9.

31 Wells, *Red Record*, 9.

to be killed to avenge their assaults upon women.”<sup>32</sup> These three excuses thrived within a federalist structure that effectively conceded criminal law as a “state’s right,” thereby leaving blacks engulfed in an ever-expanding criminal territory unchecked by a sovereign national state.<sup>33</sup>

With this compact history lesson, Wells illuminated the social construction of black criminal threat, showing that white elites continually refashioned criminality to suit their interests. Wells even used what present-day constructionists would see as scare or shudder quotation marks, which force the reader to hesitate on taken-for-granted terms like “race riots” and “Negro Domination,” making these phrases visible as utterances with suspect meaning. Similarly, Wells used a parenthetical question mark—(?)—to signal the absurdity of commonsensical terms of the US legal order. This punctuation was trademark Wells, from her earliest writings to the end. Consider one example from 1892 and another from her posthumously published autobiography. In the 1892 *Southern Horrors*, Wells wrote: “One by one the Southern States have legally (?) disfranchised the Afro-American, and since the repeal of the Civil Rights Bill nearly every Southern State has passed separate car laws with a penalty against their infringement.”<sup>34</sup> Legal disenfranchisement included poll taxes (starting with Georgia in 1877), literacy tests (starting with the infamous “Understanding Clause” in Mississippi in 1890), and white primaries. These enactments were legal supplements to the paramilitary gangs that terrorized and killed black voters.<sup>35</sup> In the same sentence Wells coupled legal disenfranchisement with criminal penalties for trespassing into Jim Crow cars, which Wells herself challenged in a court case.<sup>36</sup> In her posthumously published autobiography, Wells described her research of the Arkansas riots of 1919. Wells wrote: “The white people did just what they accused the Negroes of doing: murdered them and stole their crops, their stock, and their household goods. And even then they were invoking the law to put the seal of approval on their deeds by legally (?) executing those twelve men who were found guilty after six minutes’ deliberation!”<sup>37</sup> With the parenthetical question mark, Wells literally marked the law as questionable.<sup>38</sup>

32 Wells, *Red Record*, 10.

33 In a similar vein, Frederick Douglass held that “American federalism’s historical tendency to function as a shield for white supremacy should reduce—if not eliminate—our deference to it.” See Jack Turner, “Douglass and Political Judgment: The Post-Reconstruction Years,” in *A Political Companion to Frederick Douglass*, ed. Neil Roberts (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 213.

34 Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 13.

35 Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, edited by Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 38.

36 Using the parenthetical question mark once again, Wells pondered British versus US rail travel: “I as a Negro can ride in them free from insult or discrimination on account of color, and that’s what I cannot do in many States of my own free (?) America.” Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 172.

37 Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 403.

38 Even statutory definitions of crime were subject to convenient revision. When the white man charges the black man with rape, “does he mean the crime which the statutes of the civi-

With this primer on the historical construction of black criminality, Wells commandeered positivist empiricism and postpositivist discursive analysis. That is, her count data disconfirmed the “old thread bare” rape lie, while her history denaturalized black criminalization altogether. Such denaturalization work must be viewed within Wells’s broader intellectual project to recover history from “the southern white man’s misrepresentations” that flood “the public libraries and college textbooks of the land.” Wells feared that the history of Reconstruction, “which reflected glory on the race,” was “buried in oblivion.”<sup>39</sup> As Lawrie Balfour observes, “Decades before W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* advanced a blistering account of the political damage done by the ‘propaganda of history,’ Wells regularly reminded readers of the deeper roots of racial injustice and the critical role of history in the creation of a free society.”<sup>40</sup> After the 1898 Wilmington Riot, for example, Wells exhorted her fellow members of the Afro-American Council: “We must educate white people out of their 250 years of slave history.”<sup>41</sup>

Educating white people out of their slave history required lessons on the erasure of white men’s sexual violence. Wells and the antilynching movement broke the injunction that kept white southerners from uttering “rape” and “black women” in the same breath, as historian Tera Hunter explains. Any sexual relations between black women and white men were presumed consensual or initiated by the seductive scheming of lascivious black women.<sup>42</sup> By pairing her lynching analysis with historical accounts of white men who assaulted and killed black women and girls with impunity, Wells demonstrated her understanding of an insight brilliantly captured by historian Sarah Haley: “Lynching and rape are inextricable forms of gendered racial violence because the cultural constructions that justified them are mutually dependent and relational.”<sup>43</sup> That is, the construction of pristine white womanhood arose symbiotically with the notion of the primitively sexual black slave. White women’s purity was cast as exceptional in relation to the impurity of black women, and as imperiled by the sexual appetites of black men. Wells confronted this relational construction in two powerful sentences in *Southern Horrors*: “The miscegenation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but it is death to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women. White men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because

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lized states describe as such?” Wells asked. “Not by any means. With the Southern white man, any mésalliance existing between a white woman and a colored man is sufficient foundation for the charge of rape.” Wells, *Red Record*, 11.

39 Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 5.

40 Balfour, “Ida B. Wells and ‘Color Line Justice,’” 684.

41 Quoted in Balfour, “Ida B. Wells and ‘Color Line Justice,’” 684.

42 Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 33–34.

43 Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 115.

he succumbs to the smiles of white women.”<sup>44</sup> With this, as Patricia Hill Collins explains, Wells indicts white men “as the actual perpetrators of crimes of sexual violence *both* against African American men (lynching) *and* against African American women (rape).”<sup>45</sup>

Note too that Wells frequently described gendered racial terror in a language of price—what is cheap, what is free—because “the Southerner had never gotten over his resentment that the Negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, and his source of income.”<sup>46</sup> For a white man, “all the colored girls” were “free,” as in free for the taking, a carefree objectified “plaything.” In a similar language of price, the last sentence of *Lynch Law in Georgia* (1899) quoted from Detective Louis Le Vin’s investigation of the murder of Samuel Hose: “With these facts I made my way home, thoroughly convinced that a Negro’s life is a very cheap thing in Georgia.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in her investigation of the East St. Louis Massacre, Wells concluded: “It rests then with the Negroes everywhere to stand their ground and sell their lives as dearly as possible when attacked; to work as a unit, demanding punishment for rioters; protection for workers, and liberty for all the citizens in our country.”<sup>48</sup>

Given her understanding of the political economy of racial worth, Wells’s vision of justice transcended simple pronouncements about the value of violence. Violence was not intrinsically “barbaric,” and nonviolence had no inherent value. Wells advocated that every African American own a gun; her logic began as self-defense but ended with teaching white people to value black life. “The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted and got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense. The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give.” Had Wells ended here, the Winchester would serve self-defense only. But Wells continued: “When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life. The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged and lynched.”<sup>49</sup> Black worth is inherent, and whites can learn this lesson through their direct calculus of risk. Greater risk drives greater respect for Afro-American life; less risk continues the downward spiral of white insult and violence.

Throughout her life’s work, Wells kept the white man’s civilization and gov-

<sup>44</sup> Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 221.

<sup>46</sup> Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Ida B. Wells, *Lynch Law in Georgia* (Chicago: Chicago Colored Citizens, 1899), 18, available in the Library of Congress’s Daniel Murray Pamphlet Collection.

<sup>48</sup> Wells, *East St. Louis Massacre*, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 23.

ernment on trial. She indicted his avowed Christianity, writing that “the white man’s dollar is his god.”<sup>50</sup> She indicted his avowed rule of law, writing that white violence operates by “unwritten law.”

Wells was masterful in twinning accusations of black criminality with realities of white violence. She answered accusations of black male rapists with history lessons of institutionalized white male sexual violence. In so doing, she corrected the core logic of racial criminalization, which conflates blackness with criminality and simultaneously erases white violence and criminality.

### “What White Folks Got from Riot”

Category definitions plague efforts to quantify racist violence. The question of what distinguished a “riot” from a “lynching,” for example, was put into sharp relief in 1919, when twenty-five cities and towns rioted between April and October. In July 1919, Chicago began five days of rioting after black swimmers crossed an aquatic colorline, and whites formed mobs to beat, stab, and shoot black Chicagoans. Historian William Tuttle has noted that by World War I, black Chicagoans had come to view police as “the armed representative of white hostility.” But white mobs still managed to best police lethality: Chicago police killed seven black people and white mobs killed another sixteen.<sup>51</sup> The Illinois press refused to write that Chicago’s murderous mobs had “lynched” a single person. In October 1919, Phillips County, Arkansas, erupted in violence when whites opened fire on black sharecroppers organizing a labor union, the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America. Blacks returned fire. Whites formed posses to avenge both “crimes”—black workers’ unionization and black people’s self-defense. The number of murdered black people in Arkansas may forever be unknown, with estimates ranging from 20 to 856. One white mob participant admitted to having seen with his own eyes two to three hundred murdered black people.<sup>52</sup> But Arkansas newspapers reported only four blacks “lynched” in the riot. Working from press accounts, Monroe Nathan Work counted twelve lynchings in all of Arkansas for 1919. The NAACP counted only seven.<sup>53</sup>

Terminology segments the enormity of white violence by breaking it into seem-

50 Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 22; see James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 130–33.

51 William Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 33; Christopher Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching: Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 55–56. Southern leaders mocked northern violence as the result of too much white permissiveness toward black southern migrants. Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 18.

52 Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching*, 56.

53 Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching*, 56; Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State*, 133.



ingly oppositional categories: lynching versus execution; white mobs versus police raids; mob looting versus criminal-justice fees and fines. Wells attended to it all, and in so doing lodged systemic critique of the many tentacles of the white supremacist economic order. *The Arkansas Race Riot* took a remarkably full inventory of violence, regardless of whether it was enacted by legal or extralegal hands, and regardless of whether the violence was lethal, sexual, or part of the slow death of economic dispossession. The pamphlet's back cover gave an overview: "Scores of Negroes killed by white Rioters, 5 white men alleged to have been killed by Negroes; a half million dollars worth of Negroes' cotton stolen, 75 Negroes in Penitentiary for 21 years, 12 Negroes Sentenced to death—not a single white man arrested!"<sup>54</sup> A sixty-two-page pamphlet published at her own expense, *The Arkansas Race Riot* was, in the words of historian Patricia Schechter, Wells's "swan song," her last "sustained treatment of racial violence until she wrote her autobiography."<sup>55</sup> Paula Giddings called it Wells's "most ambitious and comprehensive tract."<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, popular Ida B. Wells anthologies rarely include it.

Like her pamphlet *The East St. Louis Massacre*, *The Arkansas Race Riot* included details about the persecution of black women, and Wells foregrounded personal narratives that she uncovered in her on-the-ground investigations in both locales. As Paula Giddings explains, black women's experiences had been "overlooked by other accounts."<sup>57</sup> Inclusion of black women's experiences, however, is more than gap filling. Attending specifically to violence against black women enabled Wells to offer a singularly expansive analysis of violence, its entangled economic, gendered and racial dimensions, all manifest indivisibly between legal and extralegal processes.

Consider several stories. Wells recounts that the wife of Frank Moore returned to her house, one month postriot, only to find her furniture and clothes gone, looted by her landlord to redecorate his house and clothe his wife. When Mrs. Moore said she had returned for pay for the year's cotton crop, as well as her stolen possessions, the landlord threatened to burn her alive. Then yet a different landlord arrested her and took her to the Helena jail. "She was kept in jail eight days and made to work from 3 o'clock in the morning to 9 or 10 o'clock; she and fifteen other colored women."<sup>58</sup> Mrs. Ware, married to the union secretary Ed Ware, was arrested and jailed for four weeks of hard labor, left to sleep on the jail's concrete floor. Jailers discharged her with seventeen others, instructed them to return to work "and never join nothing more unless they got their lawyer's or landlord's consent." Mrs. Ware's house was looted and destroyed, the books, furniture, and safe gone. Wells also

54 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, back cover.

55 Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform*, 160.

56 Giddings, *Ida*, 612.

57 Giddings, *Ida*, 612.

58 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 20. A note on names: Wells usually (though not always) referenced a married woman by her husband's name. I suspect that this was considered respectful.

quotes Lula Black, who, when dragged from her home and asked if she belonged to the union, answered the mob with a defiant yes. When asked why, “she said, ‘Because it would better the condition of the colored people; when they worked it would help them to get what they worked for.’”<sup>59</sup> The mob “knocked her down, beat her over the head with their pistols, kicked her all over the body, almost killed her, then took her to jail.” Frances Hall, a housekeeper for another union member, was murdered and tossed in the street naked, her clothes tied over her head.<sup>60</sup>

Illustrated in these accounts is the indivisibility of violence and law. Violence against black women was achieved at once through white men and women as “private” actors, local police, jailers, and wardens. Through historical trajectories, personal accounts, and sweeping economic analysis, Wells demonstrated the unearned accumulation of white economic and political power achieved through Lynch Law, sharecropping and peonage laws, and the liberal constitutional order all at once.

*The Arkansas Race Riot* shows that law and violence are indivisible mechanisms for stealing black wealth. Law enforced what Wells called “economic slavery,” the sharecropping system that kept black laborers in debt to white landlords.<sup>61</sup> The South has “fattened on [the black man’s] labor and yet kept him in serfdom for his fifty years of freedom.”<sup>62</sup> As she had done in previous work, Wells began *The Arkansas Race Riot* by exaggerating (and thereby ridiculing the notion of) “Their Crime,” the title of chapter II. Through the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America, black workers organized to collectively hold their cotton until they received a fair market price. Through the union, black workers made “a Declaration of Economic Independence, and the first united blow for economic liberty struck by the Negroes of the South! That was their crime and it had to be avenged.”<sup>63</sup> Like the 1892 lynching recounted in *Southern Horrors*, the 1919 white violence was prompted by the threat of black economic success. Black laborers of Elaine, Arkansas, collectively refused to sell cotton for going offers of 24 cents or 33 cents per pound. They demanded the market rate of 50 cents per pound, the highest price since the Civil War. Even with the routine abuses of white landlords, such as overcharging for farming supplies and steep inflation, “no padding of accounts” would be enough to keep “the Negro in debt and subjection.” Therefore, Wells concluded, “another way must be found to do this, and keep the Negro’s wealth from him.”<sup>64</sup> Hence the white riot.

As the criminal legal system grew and became more formalized, so too did its system of fees and fines. In *The East St. Louis Massacre*, Wells described the police and guards who disarmed blacks of their muskets, six-shooters, and razors, leav-

59 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 20.

60 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 21.

61 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 7.

62 Wells, *East St. Louis Massacre*, 23.

63 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 9.

64 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 9.

ing them defenseless before white mobs. Police issued fines of \$200 for carrying concealed weapons, and they jailed all who were unable to pay.<sup>65</sup> *The Arkansas Race Riot* was filled with references to extractive criminal justice practices. Black women who traveled to see their imprisoned husbands “had to pay a dollar each to the jailer for the privilege” of seeing their husbands just once.<sup>66</sup> Wells twinned this form of legal extraction with accounts of how white neighbors and landlords stole black women’s clothes, furniture, and books.

Wells also presented two tallies estimating all that was stolen from black workers through their “legal” imprisonment. One table calculated the net loss to the twelve men awaiting the death penalty:

<b>SUMMARY</b>	
Ed Ware, 100 acres cotton; 100 bales at \$225 per bale	\$22,500
Frank Hicks and Ed Hicks, 100 acres cotton; 100 bales at \$225 per bale	22,500
Albert Giles, 20 acres cotton; 20 bales at \$225 per bale	4,500
.....	.....
<hr/>	
TOTAL \$86,050	

In the top entry for Ed Ware, secretary of “the hated union,” Wells calculated stolen wealth based on Ware’s yield of cotton (one bale per acre), the weight of the average bale (500 pounds per bale), and the average price per pound (45 cents per pound, a conservative estimate as Wells noted the average price was nearer 50 cents).<sup>67</sup> From this meticulous calculation, Wells concluded: “It seems not too high as an estimate to say that these twelve men alone had \$100,000 worth of cotton, corn and cattle stolen from them by the mob which stole their liberty and are in a fair way to steal their lives unless the nation intervenes!”<sup>68</sup> Wells effectively indicted the criminal legal system as the handmaiden of white theft.

Another tally was a partial list of the seventy-five black farmers serving terms of imprisonment. Wells presented it as such:

Walter Gurley, 23 acres of cotton and corn, farmed for B. B. Stanley, Elaine, Ark.  
B. Earl, 30 acres cotton and corn, worked for Dick Howard, Wabash, Ark.

The list continued for three pages.<sup>69</sup> Each line began with the name of an imprisoned black farmer and ended with the name of the white landlord reaping the

65 Wells, *East St. Louis Massacre*, 21.  
66 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 22.  
67 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 22.  
68 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 22.  
69 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 22–24.

benefits of incarceration. Writing the list in this form, Wells transferred criminal indictment from the former to the latter.

### **“A Black Skin Was a Death Warrant”**

Through the 1910s and 1920s, Wells witnessed the ostensible decline of lynching and the rise of more professional law enforcement, more policing in the urban North, and more legal executions in the South. By Arthur Raper’s count, the average number of persons lynched per year declined each decade, from an average of 187.5 lynched each year in the 1890s, to 92.5 in the 1900s, 61.9 in the 1910s, 46.2 in the first half of the 1920, and 16.8 in the second half of the 1920s.<sup>70</sup> Wells was witnessing the rise of what Michael Klarman has called “legal lynching”—that is, “replacing lynchings with quick trials that could be counted on to produce guilty verdicts, death sentences, and swift executions.” In the system of legal lynchings, police sometimes coaxed mobs into restraint by promising hasty executions, and prosecutors urged juries to convict “in order to reward mobs for good behavior and thus encourage future restraint.”<sup>71</sup> In Wells’s hometown of Chicago prior to 1920, African Americans were never more than 4.2 percent of the city population, but they made up 12 percent of the homicide convictions and 28 percent of those executed for homicide. Within eleven southern states from 1900 to 1950, between 60 to 90 percent of all executions were of blacks.<sup>72</sup> Between 1924 and 1972, some 75 percent of men executed for the crime of “rape” in Texas were African American.<sup>73</sup> The rope was replaced with the electric chair, a sign of modern progress and humane killing. Mariame Kaba writes that “you can draw a straight line from the lynching era to our current epidemic of mass incarceration,” and then cites a 2012 study finding that US jurisdictions that had the highest lynching rates now have the highest incarceration rates.<sup>74</sup>

Wells exploited the persuasive force of condemning the hypocrisy of “lawlessness,” “barbarity,” and “anarchy” in “the land of the free and home of the brave.”<sup>75</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to read these as more than rhetorical devices. Lynching was “lawless,” but it operated fully within the logic of US racial

70 Arthur Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), 25.

71 Michael Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 119; Michael Klarman, “Powell v. Alabama: The Supreme Court Confronts ‘Legal Lynchings,’” in *Criminal Procedure Stories*, ed. Carol Steiker (New York: Foundation, 2006), 1–44.

72 Derral Cheatwood, “Capital Punishment for the Crime of Homicide in Chicago: 1870–1930,” *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 92 (2002): 846.

73 Ethan Blue, “The Culture of the Condemned: Pastoral Execution and Life on Death Row in the 1930s,” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 9 (2011): 118, 120–21.

74 Mariame Kaba, “Why I’m Raising Money to Build an Ida B. Wells Monument,” *Huffington Post*, May 2, 2018; David Jacobs, Chad Malone, and Gale Iles, “Race and Imprisonments: Vigilante Violence, Minority Threat, and Racial Politics,” *Sociological Quarterly* 53 (March 2012): 166–87.

75 As staple terms in Wells’s writing, there are too many examples to cite.

democracy. As Barnor Hesse argues, Wells used “Western legal motifs to convey a liberal democratic context to the lynching of African Americans, thereby invoking a constitutive regime of racial rule sanctioned by Western civilization.”<sup>76</sup> To emphasize the systemic Americanness of lynching, Wells frequently bestowed capital letters to Lynch Law, giving it proper noun status as a particular nation’s system of governance. Throughout her work, Wells referenced the “unwritten law” that authorized whites to police and protect white supremacy. In her 1900 essay “Lynch Law in America,” Wells rejected characterizations of lynching as “the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury.” Instead, “it represents the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an ‘unwritten law’ that justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal.”<sup>77</sup>

It should come as little surprise, then, that Wells eschewed any meaningful distinction between lynching and execution. In effect, both operated by the same “unwritten law” that authorized killing black people to serve white interests. We can see Wells’s parallel criticisms of lynching and execution by attending to two bookends, *A Red Record* (1895) and *The Arkansas Race Riot* (1919). In *A Red Record* Wells identified Lynch Law by this unholy trinity: its presumption of guilt, its reliance on coerced confessions, and its willful disregard of exculpatory evidence. Lynch Law inverted the presumption of innocence, as the “word of the accuser is held to be true” and the accused must “prove himself innocent.”<sup>78</sup> Lynch Law also claimed credibility through confession, as mobs frequently reported that “its victim made a full confession before he was hanged.”<sup>79</sup> Lynch Law had no burden of proof, and once the accusation was cast, “no evidence . . . will satisfy the mob.” Satisfaction occurred only when the accused “is bound hand and foot and swung into eternity.”<sup>80</sup> Lynch Law “assum[ed] for itself an absolute supremacy over the law of the land.”<sup>81</sup>

Two decades later, Wells re-creates this trinity as the infrastructure for understanding Arkansas state police, jailers, and jury. When Wells visited the twelve

76 Barnor Hesse, “Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Postracial Horizon,” *Southern Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (Winter 2011): 166.

77 Ida B. Wells, “Lynch Law in America,” (*Arena*, January 1900, 15–24), repr. in Ida B. Wells, *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-lynching Crusader*, ed. Mia Bay and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 394. As early as *Southern Horrors*, Wells referenced the “unwritten law.” “There was no law on the statute books which would execute an Afro-American for wounding a white man, but the ‘unwritten law’ did.” Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 19.

78 Wells, *Red Record*, 96.

79 Wells, *Red Record*, 96.

80 Wells, *Red Record*, 96.

81 Wells, *Red Record*, 21. As she wrote in *A Red Record*, “The entire system of the judiciary of this country is in the hands of white people. To this add the fact of the inherent prejudice against colored people, and it will be clearly seen that the white jury is certain to find a Negro prisoner guilty if there is the least evidence to warrant such a finding” (36).

men sentenced to death, she found Lynch Law fully manifest in the criminal legal system. Operating under the presumption of mass guilt, police had arrested and jailed over one hundred black farmers and laborers, men and women, in the small town of Elaine.<sup>82</sup> Jailers attempted to coerce confessions. Held in a Helena prison since early October 1919, the twelve prisoners told Wells upon her arrival in December that “they had been beaten many times and left for dead while there, given electric shocks, suffocated with drugs, and suffered every cruelty and torment at the hand of their jailers.”<sup>83</sup> Without regard for evidence, the jury found the twelve men guilty after only six minutes of deliberation.<sup>84</sup>

Parallel sentence construction reveals the functional equivalence of lynching and execution. Arkansas black workers who organized for economic justice, for example, were condemned “to suffer massacre at the hands of the mob and the death penalty by courts of law.”<sup>85</sup> In this formulation, massacre is to mob as execution is to law. Murder is murder, regardless of whether the blood is on the “hands of the mob” or the “courts of law.” In Arkansas, legal and extralegal white violence served the same ends of robbing black farmers of their wealth. In listing the bounty of white thieves, Wells grouped together execution, incarceration, and lynching as different means to the same end. “The white lynchers of Phillips County made a cool million dollars last year off the cotton crop of the twelve men who are sentenced to death, the seventy-five who are in the Arkansas penitentiary and the one hundred whom they lynched outright on that awful October 1, 1919!”<sup>86</sup> Likewise, in *The East St. Louis Massacre* Wells noted that even a white newspaper wrote during the white pogrom that “a black skin was a death warrant.” Wells rephrased in her conclusion: “The black skin, without regard to age, sex or innocence, was the mark for slaughter.”<sup>87</sup> A death warrant is a device of the state, but as the brutality of the massacre demonstrates, the National Guard, the police, and local white residents made good on the death warrant together.

Parallel image placement also underscores the functional equivalence of lynching and execution. In *A Red Record* Wells selected as the first image a sketch titled “The Lynching of C.J. Miller, at Bardwell, Kentucky, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1893.” It shows Mr. Miller’s body hanging from a tree. In *The Arkansas Race Riot* Wells selected as the first image a photograph, “Twelve Men Condemned By The Court.” When Wells met the twelve black men sentenced to legal murder, they sang and prayed and spoke of the hereafter. Instead Wells envisioned a justice of “open[ing] the prison gates.”

82 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 3.

83 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 5.

84 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 5.

85 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 52.

86 Wells, *Arkansas Race Riot*, 24.

87 Wells, *East St. Louis Massacre*, 10, 22.

Finally I got up and walked close to the bars and said to them in a low tone, “I have been listening to you for nearly two hours. You have talked and sung and prayed about dying, and forgiving your enemies, and of feeling sure that you are going to be received in the New Jerusalem because your God knows that you are innocent of the offense for which you expect to be electrocuted. But why don’t you pray to live and ask to be freed? The God you serve is the God of Paul and Silas who opened the prison gates, and if you have all the faith you say you have, you ought to believe that he will open your prison doors too.”<sup>88</sup>

### **“Open Your Prison Doors”: Wells and the Contemporary Crusade against Black Criminalization**

Twenty-first-century racial criminalization is institutionally and ideologically entrenched. Institutionally, there are roughly 6.8 million people held behind bars or on probation or parole; of these, roughly one-third are black. Each year police make between 11 and 13 million arrests, with violent crimes accounting for 5 to 6 percent of all arrests; roughly one-third of all arrestees are black. Each year the police make 18 million traffic stops, stopping about 12 percent of all drivers. But annually the police stop fully 24 percent of all black drivers.<sup>89</sup> Ideologically, the conflation between blackness and criminality is so extreme that rhetorical short-hands permeate the culture. The presumption of guilt that black people face in daily routines is so pervasive that the term “driving while black,” once a play on the phrase “driving while drunk,” has since been extended to include “shopping while black,” as well as walking, laughing, napping, leaving an Airbnb, or waiting in Starbucks—all suspicious activities if you are black. References to “at-risk youth,” “thugs,” “gangs,” “broken homes,” “welfare,” and “ex-felons,” even when not racially specified, represent narratives that weave blackness to criminogenic upbringing, poverty, and family dysfunction. Blackness signals criminal threat so deeply that psychological studies show that white subjects, when shown photos of black faces for less than one second, experience a lighting-up in the “fear center” of the brain.<sup>90</sup>

The city of Chicago, where Wells lived most of her life, has yet to build a monument to Ida B. Wells. As part of the campaign to memorialize Wells in Chicago, Mariame Kaba has written with confidence, “Were [Ida B. Wells] alive today, I have no doubt that we would find her at the forefront of our current struggles to

<sup>88</sup> Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 403.

<sup>89</sup> Charles Epp, Steven Maynard-Moody, and Donald Haider-Markel, *Pulled Over: How Police Stops Define Race and Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>90</sup> Tariro Mzezewa, “Napping while Black (and Other Transgressions),” *New York Times*, May 10, 2018; Imani Perry, *More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 51, 73; Elizabeth Phelps et al., “Performance on Indirect Measures of Race Evaluation Predicts Amygdala Activation,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 12 (2000): 729–38.

end criminalization.”<sup>91</sup> I agree. Below I highlight four tenets of Wells’s thought that should instruct current struggles to end criminalization.

First, forget innocence; it is the system of criminalization that is on trial. Wells recognized that notions of criminal propensity, projected categorically onto blacks as a class presumed guilty, could not be undone by rebuttals of innocence. Wells’s rejection of innocence remains relevant today, when opponents of “mass incarceration” foreground the relatively sympathetic—the low-level misdemeanants, the nonviolent drug offenders, the “lifers” sentenced on a “third strike” of stealing pizza. Advocating for the relatively innocent ultimately legitimizes the idea that the relatively guilty deserve to be hunted, caged, and killed. The categories of “serious” or “violent” crime are neither natural nor self-evident. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore points out, police and district attorneys actively produce “serious” or “violent” felony charges, and “their use is part of a racial apparatus for determining ‘dangerousness.’”<sup>92</sup> Many organizers do indeed fight criminalization from a framework that eschews innocence and respectability politics more broadly. Organizations like Hands Up United announce “This Ain’t Yo Mama’s Civil Rights Movement,” and the three black women who launched the 2012 hashtag #BlackLivesMatter—Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors—advocate pushing beyond respectability to center incarcerated and formerly incarcerated black people, criminalized trans and gender nonconforming black people, and criminalized black immigrants.<sup>93</sup> But too many embrace innocence as the counterpoint to criminalization, failing to recognize that innocence concedes criminalization by tacitly accepting the presumption that black people are perpetually on trial. As Wells wrote in 1895, “The Negro does not claim that all” lynch victims “were innocent of the charges made against them”; rather, “it is the white man’s civilization and the white man’s government which are on trial.”<sup>94</sup>

Second, authoritative data sources are handmaidens to racial criminalization, and therefore these sources should be engaged with methodological creativity and an interpretive lens informed by history. Wells was methodologically inventive and scrappy, using available statistics while also creating original data compilations based on interviews with black survivors of white violence. She did not refuse to touch statistics and “the white press.” Instead Wells retooled authoritative data sources, recoding data and reframing conclusions through eyes trained to see “unwritten laws” of profit and power. Wells attended especially to the history of alibis for white violence, narratives from lawmakers, clergy, scholars, and other elites who erased white violence by rewriting it as the corrective to black insurrection. New alibis replaced the old. Narratives of black threat moved from

91 Kaba, “Why I’m Raising Money to Build an Ida B. Wells Monument.”

92 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “The Worrying State of the Anti-Prison Movement,” *Social Justice*, February 23, 2015.

93 Barbara Ransby, “The Class Politics of Black Lives Matter,” *Dissent*, Fall 2015.

94 Wells, *Red Record*, 98.



Reconstruction-era “Negro domination” to seemingly individualized criminal offenses like rape.

We should summon Wells’s historically informed methodological sophistication as we confront mainstream sources that legitimize racial criminalization. Consider two examples. Mainstream journalistic accounts of police murders often use euphemistic verbiage of an “officer-involved shooting” or an “altercation” while referencing the murder victim as a “suspect” or a “juvenile.” Such language obscures that an officer killed someone and implies that the murder victim was guilty.<sup>95</sup> A Wellsian approach might aggregate and review mainstream journalistic reports of “officer-involved shootings.” Aggregations of this kind suggest that police kill roughly one thousand people a year, with blacks more likely to be killed even though they are less likely to be armed with a gun.<sup>96</sup> Further still, a Wellsian approach might read a subset of stories and reorganize the narratives, foregrounding actual police violence rather than the alleged transgressions of the victim.

Another authoritative data source used to justify racial criminalization is the FBI’s *Uniform Crime Reports*, usually referenced as the official crime rate. The measure, culled from police reports submitted voluntarily by certain police departments, suggests that black property and violent crime rates exceed those of whites. This difference, annunciated as a “true difference” in baseline criminality, is used to justify aggressive policing tactics in black neighborhoods. As Khalil Muhammad writes of crime statistics: “For good or for bad, the numbers do not speak for themselves. They never have. They have always been interpreted, and made meaningful, in a broader political, economic, and social context in which race mattered. The falsity of past claims of race-neutral crime statistics and color-blind justice should caution us against the ubiquitous referencing of crime statistics about black criminality today, especially given the relative silence about white criminality.”<sup>97</sup> Muhammad’s insightful admonition to remember the falsity of past claims echoes Wells’s historically informed analysis of the alibis for white violence.

Third, the vast machinery of criminalization exceeds what can be seen through a masculinist lens; attending to the experiences of black women and girls enlarges our understanding of criminalization. Lynch mobs murdered at least 150 black women in the South between 1880 and 1965, but the banner unfurled in front of the New York NAACP announced in singularly gendered terms: “A Man Was Lynched Yesterday.”<sup>98</sup> In the same vein, today “the troubling and very desperate

95 For example, after police gave Freddie Gray a “rough ride” that snapped his spine, the *Baltimore Sun* wrote, “The suspect ran, and police caught him.” Quoted in Adam Johnson, “Cop-speak: 7 Ways Journalists Use Police Jargon to Obscure the Truth,” *Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting*, July 11, 2016.

96 Franklin Zimring, *When Police Kill* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

97 Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*, 277.

98 Evelyn Simien, introduction to *Gender and Lynching: The Politics of Memory*, ed. Evelyn Simien (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2; Jennifer Williams, “‘A Woman Was Lynched

condition of young black men,” as the political scientist Cathy Cohen explains, “has been represented as a marker by which we can evaluate the condition of the whole group.” The similarly life-threatening issues confronting young black women might be recognized, but “they are not seen as representative of the public struggle for survival, accounts of which most often present black men as the targets of outside / genocidal / community-threatening attacks.”<sup>99</sup> Or, as Wells wrote in 1892, “when the victim is a colored women it is different.”<sup>100</sup>

Seeing violence against black women and girls illuminates the full contours of criminalization and affirms that all black lives matter. As Andrea Ritchie, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and all committed to #SayHerName have demonstrated, some police murders of black women can be understood within existing frameworks like driving while black, policing poverty, untreated mental health crises, and notions of “superhuman” black people impermeable to pain. But police murders of black women also exceed these familiar frameworks. Police kill black women and girls in the contexts of responding to domestic violence calls; of policing gender and sexuality, such as profiling black transgender women for prostitution-related offenses; of targeting black women as “ideal” for police sexual assault—unsympathetic victims, untrustworthy narrators; of using excessive force against pregnant black women; of terrorizing black women who demand justice for family members. Black women are unseen targets of police sexual violence, and yet this is not the same powerful symbol of black oppression as police violence against black men. Or, as Hazel Carby has argued, “the institutionalized rape of black women has never been as powerful a symbol of black oppression as the spectacle of lynching,” largely because of the extended afterlife of antebellum linkages “between black women and illicit sexuality.”<sup>101</sup> Illuminating all antiblack policing also allows us “to step away from the idea that to address police violence we must ‘fix’ individual Black men and bad police officers,” as if a “brother’s keeper” program or better training would fix what is fundamentally a structural problem.<sup>102</sup>

Extending Wells’s political philosophy to contemporary criminalization does not require us to see every police murder and execution as a “lynching.” We do not need to rehearse arguments about lynchings’ borders, trying to find the line between extralegal and legal violence. This brings me to the fourth lesson: Do not

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the Other Day’: Memory, Gender, and the Limits of Traumatic Representation,” in *Gender and Lynching*, 81–102; Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

99 Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 11–12; Dara Strolovitch, *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

100 Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 11.

101 Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 39.

102 Andrea Ritchie, *Invisible No More: Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017); Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea Ritchie with Rachel Anspach, Rachel Gilmer, and Luke Harris, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women* (New York: African American Policy Forum, 2015), 6.

be fooled by revisions to the machinery of criminalization and triumphal narratives of progress. This is especially relevant today, as the demands of Black Lives Matter are answered with superficial tinkering like new police trainings in procedural justice, police body cameras, and modest reductions in incarceration coupled with enhanced surveillance and electronic monitoring. Wells was a scholar of the law's continual repurposing as an instrument of white capitalist and patriarchal violence. She did not see progress in the replacement of lynching with legal lynching. Following her lead, we should not accept a story of American progress that reduces her *Crusade for Justice* to an antilynching campaign, victorious and complete.

## 10: W. E. B. Du Bois

### Afro-modernism, Expressivism, and the Curse of Centrality

Paul C. Taylor

#### Introduction

W. E. B. Du Bois has achieved remarkable centrality in African American political thought (and beyond). Scholars and laypeople, artists and activists speak freely and often of Talented Tenth, color lines, and double consciousness, all ideas routinely associated with Du Bois. In deference to this, Robert Gooding-Williams describes Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* as "an authoritative text . . . that African Americans have regarded as establishing an appropriate discursive and normative framework for [their] political and cultural practices."<sup>1</sup> In support of the point, he reports that William Ferris, one of Du Bois's contemporaries, described *Souls* as "the political Bible of the negro race."<sup>2</sup>

Invoking the Bible as a way of gauging Du Bois's cultural influence highlights one of the dangers of such centrality. The Bible, like a great many other towering cultural achievements, has many fewer attentive students than people who claim to yield to, or wield, its authority. When an object, text, practice, or figure becomes sufficiently central to a way of going on, close examination and critical scrutiny may seem unnecessary.

The curse of centrality registers in Du Bois studies in at least two ways. First, some of his contributions outshine others in the common picture of his work. Second, these better-known contributions are not actually *well* known, because the standard picture has sacrificed resolution and image quality for ease of reproduction. Anyone who knows anything about Du Bois knows that he feuded with Booker T. Washington; that he aimed to identify, summon, and mobilize an elite leadership drawn from the "Talented Tenth" of the black race; that he worried about something called "double-consciousness"; and that he did all of this in relation to something that he called "the color-line." But to gesture at these familiar features is not yet to say anything about them in detail. Nor is it to indicate the relationship between these features and the less familiar accounts of gender oppression, capitalism, or social inquiry that accompany and in some ways underwrite them.

This essay aims to refine the standard picture of Du Bois's political thought by fleshing out these missing details and exploring these less familiar ideas. This

1 Robert Gooding-Williams, "Du Bois, Politics, Aesthetics: An Introduction," *Public Culture* 17, no. 2 (2005): 204.

2 Gooding-Williams, "Du Bois," 205.

interpretive refinement should clarify Du Bois's contributions to the tradition of political theory that Gooding-Williams refers to as Afro-modernism. This tradition "is bound together by certain genre-defining thematic preoccupations—for example, the political and social organization of white supremacy, the nature and effects of racial ideology, and the possibilities of black emancipation."<sup>3</sup> Du Bois is a towering figure in Afro-modern thought, and his defining political ideas, both famous and obscure, show him engaging with the tradition's core questions in ways that inherit, reinvent, and supplement orthodox approaches to the social and the political.

The next section will provide a quick overview of Du Bois's long, variegated, and prolific career. Section 3 will then take up a key threshold question related to the warrant for this study: What drives the scholarly community's valorization of Du Bois? Is there something worrisome about the conditions that have enabled him to become so central? The remaining sections will then work through the cornerstones of Du Bois's political thought: his famous accounts of the color line, black leadership, and double-consciousness, and his less familiar but still politically salient positions on social theory, gender, and radicalism.

### Life and Work

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in the mostly white town of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868. After attending the town's integrated public schools and graduating at the top of his high school class, he went south to historically black Fisk University. Having collected a bachelor's degree from Fisk in 1888, he enrolled at Harvard as a sophomore. Four years later he would have a second bachelor's degree, in philosophy, and a master's degree in history. He went on to study economics at the University of Berlin, where he satisfied the substantive requirements for the doctorate but failed to meet a residency requirement. He then returned to Harvard, expanded his master's thesis into a dissertation, and became, in 1894, the first African American to receive a Harvard doctorate.

At this point Du Bois began the career that made him an internationally known public figure. The seven decades of work that followed led him to cross a variety of institutional, vocational, and ideological boundaries, in a journey toward racial and social justice that we can divide into four broad stages.

### EPISTEMIC SUASION

Between 1895 and 1910 Du Bois worked mostly in the academy, animated by the thought that, as he once put it, "the world was thinking wrong about race because it did not know."<sup>4</sup> Convinced that uncovering the truth about social conditions

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>4</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* (orig. 1940; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 30.

would lead to social justice, he doggedly set about uncovering the facts and developing a theory of their proper pursuit. During this period he personally conducted or oversaw some of the earliest large-scale systematic studies of Afro-US communities, and he mapped out plans for an ongoing (by his reckoning, century-long) institutional program of collaborative empirical research. This work has recently come to be seen by many mainstream social scientists as among the founding initiatives in US sociology.<sup>5</sup>

The center of this research program was meant to be historically black Atlanta University, where Du Bois served as a professor of economics and history. During his time in Atlanta he published *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the influential collection of “essays and sketches” that announced its author to the world as an intellectual force, and that is still his best-known book. The book also revealed that the empirical social scientist was a burgeoning public intellectual. In this spirit, Du Bois launched a couple of short-lived journals and helped establish three germinal antiracist organizations: the American Negro Academy, the Niagara Movement, and, in 1910, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP would of course go on to become one of the half dozen most influential organizations in the US struggle for racial justice. But at its founding it had exactly one black person among its original officers: W. E. B. Du Bois. With the pace and severity of antiblack racist violence undiminished by his scholarly effort, and with the prospects for research funding undermined by Booker T. Washington’s opposition to his work, the pioneering sociologist left Atlanta University in 1910 to become the NAACP’s director of publications and research.

#### ACTIVISM AND PROPAGANDA

Between 1910 and 1934, Du Bois established himself as one of the most important thought leaders in black America and in the Africana world. As the founding editor of the NAACP’s journal, *The Crisis*, he wrote passionate editorials and exacting reviews that shaped Afro-US opinion on everything from World War I to the Harlem Renaissance. During this period he wrote more books—including a book of essays called *Darkwater* and two epic political novels—and he committed himself to the Pan African movement, playing a major role in organizing four historic international congresses.

#### SEGREGATED SOCIALISM

Having soured on liberal reform and on the NAACP’s bourgeois bureaucracy, Du Bois returned to Atlanta University in 1934 to become the chair of the sociology de-

<sup>5</sup> Elijah Anderson and Tukufu Zuberi, eds., *The Study of African American Problems: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Agenda, Then and Now*, special issue, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (2000); Earl Wright, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Atlanta University Studies on the Negro, Revisited,” *Journal of African American Studies* 9, no. 4 (2006): 3–17.

partment. During this period he produced the pioneering historical studies *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) and *Black Folk: Then and Now* (1939), along with a kind of intellectual bildungsroman titled *Dusk of Dawn* (1940). He also continued his public intellectual work, replacing his lost NAACP platform with weekly columns for renowned African American newspapers and publishing an anti-imperialist jeremiad titled *Color and Democracy* (1944).

After the university forced him into retirement in 1944, Du Bois briefly returned to the NAACP as a kind of senior research fellow. But he had grown increasingly radical while the organization had embraced a form of Cold War liberalism. Du Bois was soon complaining that the US government had co-opted the NAACP leadership, which, with other transgressions real and imagined, led the organization to let his contract expire in 1948.

#### ANTICOLONIAL PACIFISM

After this final separation from the NAACP, Du Bois worked with the Council on African Affairs, and then became chair of the antiwar Peace Information Center. He also undertook a quixotic run for the US Senate on the American Labor Party ticket and continued to write for radical publications like the *National Guardian* and Paul Robeson's *Freedomways*.

After being indicted in 1951 for failing to register as an agent of a foreign power, Du Bois had to relinquish his passport and temporarily leave unsated his voracious appetite for international travel. The frivolous charges were soon dismissed, but the political firestorm around them revealed a telling shift in his constituency. The bourgeois black elite that had once admired him now saw him as something of an embarrassment, and were happy to leave him to the anticolonial, antiwar, and labor movements that now saw him as an elder statesman. In 1961 he joined the Communist Party and moved to Ghana; he died as a Ghanaian citizen on August 27, 1963.

#### Creating Centrality

Looking back over what Du Bois himself once called "the vista of ninety fruitful years," one sees a truly remarkable career, unfolding across several momentous periods of US and world history. Still, the career ended over half a century back of this writing. What makes us, some of us, still repeatedly turn to him? A variety of considerations come into play here, some predictable and praiseworthy, others less so.

The first factor in Du Bois's continued relevance is simply the richness of his political thought. This is a judgment that must continually be tested against criticism and experience, but the continued reliance on his work seems rooted to some degree in the recurring judgment that it has value for current thought and practice.

As Lewis Gordon points out, Du Bois is central “to the study of blacks and the development of black thought [because] he outlined most of the important themes of this area of inquiry since the 1890s.”<sup>6</sup> Cornel West puts it more colorfully: “For those of us interested in the relation of white supremacy to modernity . . . or the consequences of the construct of ‘race’ during the Age of Europe . . . Du Bois is the brook of fire through which we all must pass.” Popularity is no guarantee of quality, of course, but the routine turning to his ideas, not just as slogans but as elements of a rich and dynamic system of thought that requires continual interrogation, must count as at least *prima facie* evidence of quality.

Other factors, however, complicate the appeal to excellence. One of these is simply intellectual expediency. It is much easier to look to one heroic figure than to explore the traditions, debates, and exchanges that inform, contest, and environ the hero’s achievements. So it is surely the case that Du Bois’s work owes at least some of its longevity to the laziness of readers and hearers who with more effort might be inclined to work up alternative resources.

Another factor has to do with Du Bois’s own self-presentations. He often encourages consumers of his work to approach his career through the conceit that animates his political memoir, *Dusk of Dawn*: that this one life is the clearest emblem of the historical moment with which it coincides. Du Bois was powerfully positioned, as editor of the *Crisis* most clearly, to make his vision of black political life authoritative.

Du Bois’s influential position implicates a final complicating factor. He used his influence not only to establish the authority of his own perspective but also to regulate the influence others might have, especially where women were concerned. As scholars like Brittney Cooper have carefully shown, and in ways I’ll return to below, Du Bois routinely blocked or minimized the contributions of women he might have supported and acknowledged as colleagues. For example, he sidelined Ida B. Wells-Barnett in the founding of the NAACP and elsewhere, and he used his editorial discretion to exclude Anna Julia Cooper from the pages of *Crisis*, despite quoting her and otherwise drawing from her work without attribution.<sup>8</sup> In these and other ways he effectively rigged the historical influence game in his own favor, by actively curating the archive that later scholars and activists would mine for inspiration and instruction.

It is important to say a word about the way I will seek to balance Du Bois’s real importance against the maldistribution of influence and epistemic authority that has to some degree artificially inflated his reputation. The aim of this essay is to

6 Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 74.

7 Cornel West, “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization,” in Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 55.

8 Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 33–56.



tell a story about Du Bois as just one of the many touchstones of African American political thought. He is an important touchstone and surely counts for more than many others; but he is not the only one and should share the historical and scholarly spotlight with figures that he himself would have us ignore. If we continue to fill in the details and study the figures that he disregards (with their legacies and environing traditions), the dangers that come with attending uncritically to his work diminish considerably. If we recognize and insist that he was not alone, that he did not create himself from whole cloth, that he took some of the cloth and patterns he used from people he declined to credit, and that it is up to us, and available to us, to credit them now, examining Du Bois's achievements should not be tantamount to artificially inflating their importance.<sup>9</sup>

### The Color Line

Du Bois famously offered several versions of what might be his most famous claim: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the Color Line."<sup>10</sup> This line encapsulates Du Bois's fundamentally racist approach to political ontology, an approach that is itself rooted in a robustly expressivist sensibility.

The terms in play here require some unpacking. In referring to political ontology I mean to indicate a conception of the proper subjects of politics, or, put differently, of the basic entities whose trajectories, qualities, and tendencies define political life. **A racist political ontology is one that insists on the indispensability of race as a category for understanding and, perhaps, for participating in political life.** (Racism in this sense can be agnostic as to just what makes race indispensable and just how to define it.) I describe Du Bois as a racist in order to credit the fact that race provides the center of gravity for his study of political and social life, in something like the way class does for Marx.

9 There are other threshold questions I might take up here, two of which particularly stand out. One has to do with the danger of decontextualization, or of failing to achieve the proper relationship to historical context while recovering thinkers from the past. This question attaches to the work of reading any historical figure and will be familiar to students of political theory from debates about the so-called Cambridge School approach to the history of political thought. The second question has to do with the danger of epistemic domestication, or of softening the bite of an oppositional figure's thought in the attempt to recover it for orthodox work. This question attaches specifically to heretical figures, which is to say, to figures whose work relies heavily on orthodox resources while remaining severely critical of them. And it will be most familiar to students of liberatory political philosophy—in particular students who seek to draw on noncanonical figures in ways that still register among professional philosophers as philosophy. Sadly, exploring these issues in detail would take us too far afield of the main aims of this essay. As these issues are in no way distinctive to Du Bois, accommodating them here should not be a condition on the adequacy of this account. On these broader points, see J. G. A. Pocock, "Quentin Skinner: The History of Politics and the Politics of History," *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 537–38; Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

10 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Color Line Belts the World," *Collier's Weekly*, October 20, 1906, 30, as quoted in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Holt, 1995), 42.

Du Bois's political ontology was expressivist as well as racialist. "Expressivism" is the name that Charles Taylor gives to the tendency in modern North Atlantic intellectual culture that pictures the world as a site of growth.<sup>11</sup> The expressivist's default orientation to things—from selves and societies to physical laws and ethical norms—is to treat them as determinate but provisional stages in the ongoing clarification of an unfolding reality. Think here of Marx's social theory, Dewey's theory of experience, or, in the background to both, Hegel's theories of everything. Reality, on this picture, expresses itself the way artists, thoughtful artists, claim to: not in the sense of taking an idea or impulse that is fully formed and simply externalizing it, but in the sense of making an inchoate idea determinate in the act of actualization and externalization. It may help to think of this the way the Romantics did: expression in this sense is akin to what a seed does when it grows into a tree.

Du Bois's expressivist commitments manifest themselves in at least three ways. First, his social ontology depicts a single human family that develops multiple, evolving ways of being human. Second, this ontology, reminiscent of Johann Gottfried Herder's, informs his picture of normative politics, which holds, among other things, that human collectives have rights and duties of self-determination and self-realization. Finally, the aspect of his thought that might broadly be considered his ethics—his sense of how one ought to carry the existentially fraught burden of constructing an individual life plan, and of how societies ought to organize themselves to support this work—holds that individuals have, or should have, the opportunity for holistic self-development, to experience, as he puts it in one of his clearest statements on the point, "the free enjoyment of every natural appetite."<sup>12</sup>

Distinguishing the different modes of expressivism makes it easier to track the shifts in Du Bois's racialist political ontology.<sup>13</sup> Early on he embraces the sort of Herderian racial nationalism that animates the famous 1897 essay "The Conservation of Races." In this essay he rejects the thought that it might be time "to deprecate and minimize race distinctions" and insists instead "that out of one blood God created all nations." He continues with the sober announcement that "in our calmer moments we must acknowledge that human beings are divided into races" and "it is necessary, therefore, in planning our movements, in guiding our future development, that . . . we rise above the pressing, but smaller questions . . . to survey the whole question of race in human philosophy."<sup>14</sup> He goes on to sketch an elaborate philosophy of history in which the human family eventually resolves

<sup>11</sup> See Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 13–17; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 413.

<sup>12</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Revelation of St. Orgne the Damned," in *Writings: The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade / The Souls of Black Folk / Dusk of Dawn / Essays and Articles*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1061.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Kirkland, "The Problem of the Color Line: Normative or Empirical, Evolving or Non-evolving," *Philosophia Africana* 7, no. 1 (2004): 57–82.

<sup>14</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 20.

itself from small communities into larger groupings and then into a few large racial groups, each struggling to realize a particular vision of human possibility.

By the time *Dusk of Dawn* appears in 1940, he has moved toward treating the race concept less as the centerpiece of a philosophy of history than as a resource for social theory and for political analysis and activism. Using this concept allows us to capture vital features of the social world that we might otherwise miss, since “it is impossible for the clear-headed student of human action . . . to avoid facing the fact of a white world which is today dominating human culture and working for the continued subordination of the colored races.”<sup>15</sup> This diagnostic use of race-thinking lays bare sociopolitical realities that militate in favor of using the race concept as a political tool. Race-thinking in this sense is a way of inviting the people who are similarly situated relative to the mechanisms of racial stratification to embrace their shared condition and close ranks to combat it. The idea that “race” names a population of humans who should join forces because they “have had a common history; have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory”<sup>16</sup> underwrote Du Bois’s lifelong commitment to what Shelby describes as a pragmatic form of nationalism.<sup>17</sup> This pragmatic view competed for Du Bois’s attention with a “classical” nationalism rooted in a shared metaphysical essence. But over time he relied more heavily on a call for political solidarity along racial lines rooted not in metaphysics but in a shared social condition and a shared stake in ameliorating this condition.

#### POLITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY: DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

Du Bois is a racialist in the sense that the racial population is his favored unit of analysis and organization in his political theory. He did not, however, remain at the level of the population in his analysis. He regarded racialization as a multi-level process that depends crucially on, among other things, working through the motivational sets of the persons it sorts into populations. In this respect, race was for him a product of—or, perhaps better, a way of registering and manipulating—a variety of psychocultural, ideological, and discursive forces, forces that register and shape the lived experiences of the individual members of racial populations. (These forces also interact with and inflect material conditions and economic forces, as we’ll see below.) This commitment to a broadly phenomenological analysis inserts Du Bois into the prehistory of the black consciousness and black power movements and finds its clearest expression in his account of double consciousness.

15 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940; repr. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 138.

16 Du Bois, *Dusk*, Oxford ed., 59.

17 Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

The canonical formulation of double consciousness in Du Bois's work appears in this famous passage early in *Souls*: "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world. . . . It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. . . . One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body."<sup>18</sup> There is a great deal going on here, as well as in the other passages in other places that develop these ideas. The result is less a single account than a matrix of interrelated arguments developing one or more of the following themes.

- 1 *Social duality*. Blacks under white supremacy inhabit a peculiarly bifurcated social world. This is a material condition, evident in such facts as the distribution of wealth. But it is also a psychocultural condition as blacks "code switch" between hegemonic and counterhegemonic practices in an antiblack world.
- 2 *Psychological duality*. To be black in an antiblack society is to be at risk for potentially dire psychological challenges, including alienation and stereotype threat. Some commentators trace this line of thought to the more specific class-based alienation facing elite blacks like Du Bois, who were cut off both from white elites and from the majority of blacks.<sup>19</sup>
- 2 *Intersubjective struggle*. To speak of blacks seeing themselves through the eyes of white others is to insist on the discursive and intersubjective dimensions of subject-formation under white supremacy. On this neo-Hegelian approach, racialized selves are always formed at the crux of a struggle for recognition in contexts shaped by racial ideologies and racialized perceptions.
- 3 *Epistemic privilege and constraint*. The reference to "a seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight" alludes to folk theories of mystically enhanced perception to suggest a kind of race-based epistemic privilege.<sup>20</sup> The idea here is that racialization as black positions one to discern aspects of the world that differently racialized knowers tend to overlook. Contemporary theorists appeal in this spirit to epistemologies of ignorance, which insulate knowers without this "second sight" from salient facts about their social environment.<sup>21</sup>

18 Du Bois, *Souls*, in *Writings*, 364.

19 Shamoon Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888–1903* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 116; Charles Peterson, *DuBois, Fanon, Cabral: The Margins of Elite Anti-colonial Leadership* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 27.

20 Judy L. Isaksen, "Veil, in African American Culture," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed., ed. William A. Darity Jr. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008), 8:602, Gale Virtual Reference Library, accessed March 16, 2010; Thomas Jemielity, "Samuel Johnson, the Second Sight, and His Sources," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1974): 404.

21 José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

- 4 *Alternative temporality.* A common feature of white supremacist ideologies is a particular consciousness of time in modernity. On this approach, the meaning of the modern consists in white Europe's repudiation of a confused *dark* past of bankrupt traditions. Whites then become the quintessential moderns, while nonwhites are backward and barbaric. Accordingly, a common move in antiracist discourse is to insist that European modernity's roots lie in moral evils like slavery, thereby positioning *nonwhites* as history's progressive force.<sup>22</sup>

The political implications of these themes are not far to seek. To contend with a society that structures itself in antiblack racial dominance just is to contest the conditions that these themes illuminate: the asymmetric distribution of social goods like access to public space; the relentless erosion of the bases of psychological self-esteem; the inexorable intertwining of the phenomenological mechanisms of subject-formation with the processes of racial immiseration and oppression; the epistemic injustices that accrue when whitely ways of seeing, describing, and inquiring about the world are made dominant; and the easy equations that link whiteness with progress and blackness with primitivism.

These layers of significance notwithstanding, Du Bois's interest in double consciousness may be far outstripped by the interest his readers have taken in it.<sup>23</sup> Despite the fact that he says fairly little about double consciousness beyond the passages discussed here, his readers and commentators have elevated this notion to a place of considerable prominence. Du Bois helped this elevation along by articulating the idea in perhaps the most stirring prose he ever managed, with the "two warring souls" passage constituting "probably—excepting perhaps his statement designating the 'color line' as the twentieth century's distinctive problem—the most widely known and most frequently cited statement of any in Du Bois's entire corpus."<sup>24</sup>

### Practicing Politics: Uplift, Elites, and Feuds

If the color line and double-consciousness stand out as Du Bois's most iconic intellectual contributions, his ideas about the "Talented Tenth" and the failings of Booker T. Washington are not far behind. Particularly for readers outside of scholarly circles—and among scholars before the late 1980s or so—the Washington feud and the Talented Tenth program tend to be more central, especially in rela-

22 "Modernity in black involves tempering the future-oriented present of African Americans with 'the sobering realization of the meaning of progress.'" W. E. B. Du Bois, as quoted in Frank Kirkland, "Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black," *Philosophical Forum* 24, nos. 1–3 (1992–93): 158.

23 Adolph Reed, *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See esp. chaps. 7–8.

24 Reed, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 91.

tion to questions of concrete political analysis and strategy. These aspects of Du Bois's thinking define his distinctive approach to the work of racial uplift politics.

Kevin Gaines describes the ideology of racial uplift as an "internally contested field of discourse" that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century as a small but growing black elite sought out strategies for responding to systematic oppression and racist terror. Their response was organized around "the belief that educated, elite blacks have a duty and responsibility for the welfare of the majority of African Americans." The internal contestation refers to tensions between moralistic and democratic ways of cashing out this sense of responsibility.

For uplift moralists, concerned with their class status and "affirming their respectability," the aim was to "reform the character and manage the behavior of the black masses." For uplift democrats, concerned with social justice and an "inclusive sense of collective social advancement," by contrast, the aim was to promote collective well-being through public service, community self-help, and what we would now call "capacity building."<sup>25</sup> On both approaches, elite leadership, education, group advancement, and the status of civil and political rights are defining themes.

Du Bois came of age intellectually as the uplift ideology was coming into its own, and his approach to the ideology's core themes—elites, education, group advancement, and claiming rights—to a considerable degree defines his conception of black politics. Attending to these themes in his work shows that what looks at first glance like a pair of related positions—a story about elite leadership and an argument about the failings of one leader's approach—actually resolves into a handful of distinguishing commitments. Focusing on this more fine-grained set of commitments allows us to decenter Washington and to examine the theoretical positions that animate what is too often nearly reduced to an interpersonal feud.

#### ELITISM

Du Bois registers the uplift ideologist's focus on elites in his "Talented Tenth" thesis. He revisited this thesis throughout his career, attempting to keep it aligned with his evolving views in other areas. This evolution never quite shook the commitment to elitism as such, though it did force some adjustment in his ideas about class, character, and expertise.

The canonical articulation of the thesis appears in an eponymous 1903 essay, featuring words like these: "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death

25 Kevin K. Gaines, "Racial Uplift Ideology in the Era of 'the Negro Problem,'" *Freedom's Story*, National Humanities Center, paragraphs 9–10, 5, 6. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/18651917/essays/racialuplift.htm>, accessed November 25, 2017.

of the Worst, in their own and other races.”<sup>26</sup> This passage sounds the familiar themes of the uplift moralist. The “exceptional men” of the race are not just privileged, ambitious, or otherwise contingently elevated to exceptional status. They are *better*, and presumptively charged with, and presumptively willing to accept, the morally freighted burden of guiding “the Mass” away from their lowly status.

There are several ways to account for Du Bois’s elitism, but some will be of more theoretical interest than others. One might appeal to the psychic income of intraracial class stratification, which made the college-educated black bourgeoisie highly motivated to insist on their differences from the rest of the race. And there are of course the facts of historical and biographical context, which invite reflection on, among other things, Du Bois’s Victorian intellectual upbringing. But a less obvious factor than either of these is a kind of technocratic impulse. He was convinced that responsible leadership required detailed knowledge of whatever lawlike patterns thoughtful inquiry might find in social life.

We can see Du Bois’s interest in technocratic expertise, as well as his sober re-evaluation of moralism, in a late (1948) reflection on the evolution of the Talented Tenth thesis. Around the time of his original Talented Tenth argument, he says, “I . . . saw salvation through intelligent leadership; as I said, through a ‘Talented Tenth.’ And for this intelligence, I argued, we needed college-trained men. I assumed that with knowledge, sacrifice would automatically follow. In my youth and idealism, I did not realize that selfishness is even more natural than sacrifice.”<sup>27</sup>

He then doubles down on the value of expertise while repudiating the class biases and naiveté about human motivation that drove his early thinking. The key is an insight he traced to his study of Marxist thought. He realized: “My Talented Tenth must be more than talented, and work not simply as individuals. Its passport to leadership was not alone learning, but expert knowledge of modern economics as it affected American Negroes; and . . . its willingness to sacrifice and plan for such economic revolution in industry and just distribution of wealth, as would make the rise of our group possible.”<sup>28</sup> The Marxian shift encouraged Du Bois to disaggregate the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie, thereby making room for a more radically democratic conception of leadership and uplift.

#### LIBERAL EDUCATION

While Du Bois’s conception of elite leadership evolved over time, his insistence on the value of liberal higher education never wavered. This is one of the most conspicuous points where his views diverged from Washington’s. Washington publicly advocated for vocational education as the prudent limit of Negro aspi-

26 W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth” (1903), Oxford African American Studies Center, par. 1.

27 W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth Memorial Address” (1948), in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, pars. 5–6, 348, originally published in *Boulé Journal* 15, no. 1 (October 1948).

28 Du Bois, “Talented Tenth Memorial Address,” par. 12.

ration, yet Du Bois insisted that liberal higher education was vital to the work of racial uplift. One reason was the need to cultivate technocratic expertise, as discussed above. But there were deeper and more interesting reasons rooted in the core of Du Bois's vision of ethical life.

Du Bois's early uplift theory imagined education as a civilizing mechanism, where *civilizing* and its cognate terms signal the conviction that the only route to cultural progress runs along a path "that replicates, or at least resembles, the history of Western Europe."<sup>29</sup> In this spirit, he held that rigorous training in "the best that has been thought and said" would help blacks catch up to European civilization and refine the cultural gifts that white supremacist oppression had kept them from cultivating. For this reason his early writings are dotted with references to "backward" Negroes and unlettered masses, awaiting improvement through education. He eventually adopted a more radical, proto-Afrocentrist approach, calling attention to the dire state of European-led civilization in the wake of disasters like the First World War and insisting on the underappreciated gifts that black folks had already contributed to world civilization. In this mood he looked forward to the revolution in values—anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, and so on—that a resurgent Africa could introduce to and model for the world.

As Du Bois's civilizationist fervor waned, he foregrounded a less troubling vision for the link between education, culture, and moral improvement. His expressionist insistence on multidimensional human personhood led him to call for political structures that permit and promote variegated self-realization. The political implications of this approach come through clearly in the 1926 address "Criteria of Negro Art," where he explains the distinctively black vision of the good life: "Pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world . . . a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America."<sup>30</sup> For Du Bois, liberal higher education is one way to cultivate the capacity to create and appreciate beauty. This capacity is a value in its own right, as part of a properly organized human life. But it is also useful as a check on our political aspirations, which should always make room for the sort of vision articulated here and for the critical perspective on our ethical values that art at its best can promote.

#### GROUP ADVANCEMENT: LEADERSHIP AND LIFTING

The uplift theorist's interest in black group advancement raises at least three questions that go to the heart of Du Bois's vision for political life. First: what does

29 Jeremiah Moses Wilson, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 229.

30 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (1926; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 325.



advancement look like? Or advancement from what, to what? Second: what are the ethicopolitical implications and content of the ties that bind racialized individuals into a group? And third: if advancement is a matter of uplift, which is to say, of elites “lifting as they climb,” then what kind of leadership does this lifting amount to?<sup>31</sup>

For the early Du Bois, successful racial uplift meant helping black people take their rightful place in a newly inclusive modern civilization. This had in part to do with overcoming black “backwardness” and depravity. But the problem with backwardness was that it was both the result of and the justification for continuing racist exclusions. Were they not excluded from the civilizing institutions of Western culture, including schools and labor markets, blacks would not be uncivilized. So the deeper burden of uplift was to make inclusion possible and imperative, by reforming blacks and by recalling whites to the principles they themselves endorsed. On this approach, racial discrimination is an anomalous deviation from the principles that govern an otherwise just basic structure.

For the later Du Bois, this anomaly theory of racial discrimination gave way to a theory of racial injustice as a constitutive element of modern life. After the devastation of World War I and his encounter with Marx and Freud, he could no longer aspire simply to inclusion in a modern civilization that was rotten to its core. So group advancement must be about more than moving from exclusion to inclusion. It must involve social transformation, of the sort that socialists espouse when they are not complicit with white supremacist and masculinist norms and practices.

If the first question about group advancement is just what the group is advancing toward, a second question has to do with just what the group is, and with the ethical implications of answering that question one way rather than another. As we’ve seen, a shifting conception of race provides Du Bois with the primary unit in his sociopolitical analyses. And here the ethical questions arise: What specifically political content attends the fact of racial group organization? Do the group members have obligations to each other? If so, what grounds these obligations? These questions point back to the distinction between strong and weak nationalism and to Du Bois’s growing unease with the metaphysical sleight of hand that underwrites classical nationalism. At his best, he was something like one of Tommie Shelby’s pragmatic nationalists, for whom solidarity and loyalty are rooted in rational judgments about things like political efficacy.<sup>32</sup>

Just as Du Bois’s ideas about the nature of the group bear on the issue of political ethics, they also bear on the question of group leadership. We’ve already seen Du Bois’s commitment to leadership by elites. As with the uplift ideology

31 This section relies heavily on the account in Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow*, though I’ll abstract away from the finer points of interpretation that separate contributors to the Du Bois literature.

32 Tommie Shelby, “Two Conceptions of Black Nationalism: Martin Delany on the Meaning of Black Political Solidarity,” *Political Theory* 31, no. 5 (2003): 664–92.

more generally, there are more and less objectionable ways to cash out this commitment. If “black folk” are, literally, a folk in the sense that Herder would have meant, then the burden of leadership is to help that group express its antecedently constituted essence in the domains of politics and culture. Du Bois adopted a form of this political expressivism<sup>33</sup> early in his career but moved, as his sense of the group shifted, to thinking of the race less as a folk than as a public in Dewey’s sense, constituted by the way its members were similarly situated relative to a constellation of shared problems and conditions. The burden of leadership for a group like this will be different and will align much more neatly with the sort of technocratic vision sketched earlier than with the messianic vision of the classical nationalist. It is no surprise, then, that while the young Du Bois extolled the virtues of figures like Otto von Bismarck, who “made a nation out of a mass of bickering peoples,”<sup>34</sup> the older Du Bois sought to build a socialist vanguard, armed with expert knowledge of modern economics.

#### CLAIMING RIGHTS

The fourth theme of the uplift ideology is an abiding concern with black civil, political, and social rights. Uplift advocates had different views of rights-based advocacy. Sometimes the differences tracked the divide between moralists and democrats, and turned on such questions as whether blacks had earned the standing to claim citizenship rights. But sometimes, as in the split between Du Bois and Washington, the disagreement turned on questions of strategy. The stakes of this debate were high, as the outcome was meant to settle questions about whether and how vigorously to protest oppression and agitate for equality. As always, Du Bois’s thinking shifted over time, but he consistently argued, with important qualifications that also shifted over time, that protest and agitation were central to black politics.

Early in Du Bois’s career, rights-based agitation was central to his focus on advancement through inclusion. In this spirit—the spirit that animated, for example, his early work with the NAACP—he sought to call “the white world” to its higher principles and win inclusion for blacks. As he turned his attention from inclusion to transformation, his optimism waned and the prospect of winning white hearts and minds played less of a role in his thinking.

Waning optimism still left Du Bois with two other reasons for rights-based agitation, both of which emerged in his responses to accommodationists who, like Washington, argued for the strategic disavowal of black rights. The idea behind this strategy was that refraining from public protests against exclusion and oppression would bring other benefits, such as goodwill from whites, room to maneuver

33 Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow*, 167.

34 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International, 1968), 126.

economically, and fewer distractions from the work of moral improvement. Du Bois's first response was that any gains that might accrue from accommodation would always be insecure if basic rights, like the right to property, remained as insecure as white supremacist domination in the Jim Crow US had made them. His second response proceeded from a broadly Kantian view about the relationship between protest and self-respect. On this view, self-respect—a value that was crucial to Washington's own uplift program—requires that one claim one's rights and defend them when they are challenged. To do anything less is to risk eroding one's sense of oneself as a moral being, and perhaps to violate duties to oneself as a responsible moral agent.<sup>35</sup>

Du Bois argued for protest and agitation throughout his career, but he drew the limits of these arguments differently at different points. Early on he regarded only certain kinds of protest as appropriate, in ways that may be most clearly marked by his indifference to the work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Wells-Barnett is best known for her pioneering antilynching advocacy but, as noted above, might have been better known as one of the founders of the NAACP were it not for the machinations of Du Bois and others. Du Bois often downplayed the contributions of women, in ways we'll return to below. But he also sought to contain approaches to uplift that conflicted with his early commitment to interracial elite coalitions. Wells-Barnett, like many others, was skeptical about just how far white sympathy could be relied on or trusted, and she typically pressed her case in public without regard for the prospect of offending white allies.<sup>36</sup> Du Bois was more circumspect early on, when his clashes with the NAACP leadership were still some distance in the future.

Later in his career Du Bois continued to temper his ambitions for protest, but in a different way: by reference not to the fragile bonds of interracial comity but to the near-term inevitability of white domination. This is the spirit that animates his late turn to a plan for strategic self-segregation:

This plan . . . would have for its ultimate object, full Negro rights and . . . equality in America; and it would most certainly approve, as one method of attaining this, continued agitation, protest, and propaganda. . . . [But] this plan would start with the racial grouping that today is inevitable and proceed to use it as a method of progress along which we have worked and are now working. Instead of letting this segregation remain largely a matter of chance and unplanned development . . . it would make the segregation a matter of careful thought and intelligent planning on the part of Negroes.<sup>37</sup>

35 Thomas E. Hill Jr., "Servility and Self-Respect," *Monist* 57, no. 1 (1973): 87–104. See also Howard McGary, "Forgiveness and Slavery," in *Between Slavery and Freedom*, ed. Howard McGary and Bill Lawson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 90–112.

36 Paula Giddings, *Ida: A Sword among Lions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

37 *Dusk* (Transaction ed.), 199.

Here we see Du Bois recognizing the pervasiveness and likely persistence of antiblack oppression and animus, and arguing for a stoic redirection of liberatory energies. Segregation is, for the moment, here to stay; so instead of simply enduring it or railing impotently against it, blacks should work strategically within it, building their capacity to participate in the evolving world economy. The forces of organized opposition are right to insist on equality, but the forces of resignation are also right to accept, in anticipation of the racial “realism” of Derrick Bell,<sup>38</sup> that blacks are in no position right now to force the “powerful majority” to accept them as equals. So why not combine these insights with a plan to use the necessary evil of segregation as an occasion to regroup, as an incubator for a nascent black community?

### Gender, Radicalism, and Inquiry

The familiar constellations of ideas discussed above open onto some less familiar ideas that are nevertheless vital for understanding Du Bois’s political thought and practice. His focus on political self-assertion was refracted through his evolving relationship to socialist radicalism. His focus on the color line was complicated by a profeminist, proto-intersectional, but still masculinist recognition of group complexity. And at least one strand in his complicated account of double consciousness informs his interests in the politics of knowledge.

#### MASCULINIST PROFEMINISM

Du Bois is often lauded for his vocal advocacy for women and fervent repudiation of sexism and patriarchy. The standard markers of this profeminist work are important essays like “Woman Suffrage” from 1915 and “The Damnation of Women” from five years later. “Damnation” begins with this trenchant line: “The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause.”<sup>39</sup> Despite the ambiguity in the expression “next to,” which could mean “next in order of priority” or “alongside,” it is clear that Du Bois means for his readers to take “the uplift of women” as a cause on something like the same level as the iconic color line problem. “Uplift” in this context referred to goals that later figures would endorse as a matter of course, but that were unusual for high-profile men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: conferral of the right to vote; acceptance and recognition as full participants in the labor force; acknowledgment that female sexuality is not just another contested masculine possession—the masculine need to defend “our” women from defile-

<sup>38</sup> Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Damnation of Women” (1920), in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 309.

ment by racial others animated racist and antiracist arguments alike—but also a resource for self-realization and enjoyment; and so on.

Unfortunately, Du Bois's professional and personal choices were often in tension with these profeminist commitments. Examples of this abound, beginning with the cases of Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper, noted above. In a less familiar but equally worrisome case, he remained studiously indifferent to the intellectual and political projects that animated the National Association of Colored Women, an organization that under the leadership of Fannie Barrier Williams and others assembled and mobilized black publics more effectively than Du Bois's American Negro Academy, before the founding of the NAACP.<sup>40</sup>

It is important to note that the worry here is not just that Du Bois had uneven professional and personal relationships with women. The problem is that, as Joy James puts it, his "masculinist worldview influences his writing and diminishes his gender progressivism." Despite rejecting "patriarchal myths about female inferiority," he "holds on to a masculinist framework that presents the male as normative."<sup>41</sup> He was unable, in other words, to imagine women as fellow political actors, and this incapacity inflected his political arguments and activities. As a result, his work cemented a narrative of antiracist activism that marginalized the NACW and Wells's antilynching campaign while foregrounding the NAACP and the men in suits who ran it, thereby helping to shape the practice and the history of African American politics in ways that, years later, Ella Baker would criticize in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

These limitations notwithstanding, Du Bois did take some steps toward what Kimberlé Crenshaw would invite us to call "intersectional" analysis.<sup>42</sup> He refused "to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis" of sex, gender, or race alone. He contested the way that "this single-axis framework erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification, and remediation of" social injustice.<sup>43</sup> But as James points out, "he also mystified the agency of African American women"<sup>44</sup> by ignoring or minimizing their work as activists, and by treating their immiseration less as evidence that fellow persons are suffering than as a marker of how much work black men would have to do to achieve racial uplift.<sup>45</sup>

40 Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 33–56.

41 Joy James, "Profeminism and Gender Elites," in *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality, and W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 70.

42 Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

43 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1989): 140.

44 James, "Profeminism," 69.

45 Ange-Marie Hancock, "W. E. B. Du Bois: Intellectual Forefather of Intersectionality?," *Souls* 7, no. 3 (2005): 74–84.

## FROM REFORM TO RADICALISM

While Du Bois fell short of a truly intersectional analysis of race in relation to sexuality and gender, he came closer in thinking about race, geopolitics, and class. His account of white supremacy was always informed by his reflections on political economy, and from the beginning—his doctoral dissertation on the suppression of the transatlantic slave trade—he put these reflections in global and transnational perspective. And though he never quite broke free of a Victorian conception of class and its workings, he spent much of his career developing an increasingly radical account of empire and militarism in light of what Cedric Robinson—to whom we will return—would later call “racial capitalism.”<sup>46</sup>

One key to Du Bois’s radicalism is the fact that he endorsed some variety of socialism for most of his adult life, though the content of this endorsement shifted as he abandoned the anomaly theory of racist exclusion for a constitutive theory of white supremacist social formations. Early on he embraced a kind of “pragmatic, Fabian socialism”<sup>47</sup> and was eager to chart a path between communism and unfettered capitalism. At this point he had a variety of reasons to be wary of revolutionary approaches to socialism. He was, for example, encouraged by the New Deal’s demonstration of the prospects for reforming capitalism, pessimistic about the revolutionary potential of “unlettered” working people, doubtful that arguments about class conflict applied to the African American community, and concerned that white revolutionaries sought to use blacks as cannon fodder. Eventually, though, he moved far enough to the left to join the Communist Party.

There are a great many additional keys to Du Bois’s radicalism, but none are more central than his commitment to a kind of racial capitalism, in the sense borrowed above from Cedric Robinson. This is the idea that, as Walter Johnson puts it, “racism and capitalism must be understood as dialectically intertwined,” with, he goes on to say, “the global operation of capital producing and depending upon differentiated and yet related racial formations all the world over.”<sup>48</sup> Du Bois engages with this idea throughout his career, in ways that inform the other radical arguments—on militarism, empire, the varieties of socialism, and more—that limitations of space force me to leave aside here.

Two of Du Bois’s more pointed engagements with the idea of racial capitalism appear in celebrated texts from the middle and late middle of his career. The first appears in the essay “The African Roots of the War” from 1915. Here he reads the First World War as a struggle for “the ownership of materials and men in the

46 Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (orig. 1983; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3.

47 Manning Marable, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005), 109.

48 Walter Johnson, “Racial Capitalism and Human Rights,” *Boston Review*, Forum 1: Race Capitalism Justice (2017): 105–10, 143.

darker world” and as a case study in reconciling imperial exploitation with democratic commitments.<sup>49</sup> How can this reconciliation be achieved? By making the democratic nation the beneficiary of empire and inviting “the white workingman . . . to share the spoil of exploiting ‘chinks’ and ‘niggers.’”<sup>50</sup> Twenty years later, a similar idea animates the heretical revisionism of *Black Reconstruction* (1935), where Du Bois argues that “the plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America, on which modern commerce and industry was founded.”<sup>51</sup>

Du Bois’s exploration of racial capitalism in *Black Reconstruction* is particularly important as a marker of his centrality to the tradition of Black radicalism. On Robinson’s germinal account of this tradition, the “Black” in “Black radicalism” and “Black Marxism” is transformative, not simply additive. For the towering figures in this tradition, the burden of the work is not to perform Western or European radicalism in blackface. The burden is to reframe and decenter traditional approaches to radicalism.

Du Bois—first among equals in Robinson’s pantheon—effectively models this work of reframing in *Black Reconstruction*. Taking up the argument discussed above, that “American slavery was a *subsystem* of world capitalism,” not a feudal atavism,<sup>52</sup> the book offers (among much else, to be sure) two stunning—and, once they come into view, stunningly sensible—acts of reinterpretation. First, it insists that the enslaved African was a *worker*, as the title of the book’s first chapter declares, and that “the Negro problem” was in part a labor problem, as developments like the Free Soil movement made clear. Second, it points out that a crucial dynamic in the Civil War was the withdrawal of black labor from the southern cause, which, when examined from the perspective of a race-aware Marxism, looks a great deal like a “general strike.”

One crucial implication of the general strike argument offers a fitting route back to the issue of Du Bois’s contribution to Robinson’s Black radical tradition, and to radicalism more generally. The argument shows that people in social settings nearly ignored by orthodox Marxism can constitute a vital revolutionary force, and can achieve this condition by relying on liberatory understandings and energies rooted not in European theories and social formations but squarely in black life-worlds.<sup>53</sup> Du Bois shows that Black Marxism is not simply Marxism as amended and adopted by black people. It is, rather, and all at once, a recontextualization, decentering, and expansion of Marxism that, as Robin Kelley puts it in a foreword to Robinson’s book, “shifts the center of radical thought and revolution

49 W. E. B. Du Bois, “The African Roots of the War,” *Atlantic Monthly* 115 (May 1915): 707–14, reprinted in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 647.

50 Du Bois, “African Roots,” 645.

51 Johnson, “Racial Capitalism and Human Rights,” 10, quoting W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (1935).

52 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 200.

53 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 1–2, 199–200.

from Europe to the so-called ‘periphery’—to the colonial territories, the marginalized colored people of the metropolitan centers of capital, and those Frantz Fanon called ‘the wretched of the earth.’”<sup>54</sup>

#### ON THE POLITICS OF KNOWING

*Black Reconstruction* is a milestone not only in Du Bois’s evolving commitment to class analysis but also in his interest in a politics of knowledge. Du Bois was, as Reiland Rabaka and others put it, a critical social theorist: he aimed to produce “a social theory critical of present forms of domination, injustice, coercion, and inequality.”<sup>55</sup> And he meant for this criticism to excavate and compensate for the modes of inquiry that had been driven or distorted by unjust social imperatives.<sup>56</sup>

Du Bois’s critical social theory, like other aspects of his work, evolved as he modified his orientation to certain basic commitments. The basic commitments in this case mark him, to put it very broadly, as an empiricist with pragmatic and modernist tendencies. He always believed that empirical inquiry could reveal important facts about the social world; that the most interesting of these facts involved processes rather than things and concrete experiential realities rather than abstractions; that knowledge of these facts was essential to social progress; and that progress was not just possible but vital. But all of these commitments shifted as his broader outlook on racial and social uplift shifted, and moved him from critical positivism to radical empiricism, and then to a form of anticolonial materialism.

Critical positivism dominates his work in the period before 1899. The key for him at this stage was more and better scientific study, to clear away the confusions about human social life that let racial animus flourish and that needlessly hinder the essential work of building human capacities and promoting social welfare. In this spirit he launched Atlanta University Studies and undertook the remarkable solitary odyssey of the *Philadelphia Negro*, both of which sought to replace myths about “the Negro” with data. This is also the period of the expressly theoretical essay that conveys his hope for this work, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” which argues for a coordinated effort between predominantly white and historically black higher education institutions, and assumes that anyone interested in the truths of social reality will support and encourage this work.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, foreword to Robinson, *Black Marxism*, xii.

<sup>55</sup> Reiland Rabaka, “The Souls of Black Radical Folk: W. E. B. Du Bois, Critical Social Theory, and the State of Africana Studies,” *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 5 (2006): 732; Stephen Best, *The Politics of Historical Vision: Marx, Foucault, Habermas* (New York: Guilford, 1995), xvii.

<sup>56</sup> The main ideas of this section are developed more fully in Paul C. Taylor, “W. E. B. Du Bois,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*, ed. George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 426–47.

<sup>57</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Study of the Negro Problems” (1897), abridged in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Sociology and Black Community*, ed. Dan Green and Edwin Driver (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 70–84.



The public display of a lynched black man's knuckles in an Atlanta storefront in 1899 left the optimistic Atlanta scientist feeling that "something died in me"<sup>58</sup> and helped move him from a critical positivism to a radical empiricism. He came to see that merely shining the light of truth on injustice would not lead to social amelioration, that conducting empirical inquiry in light of this realization required a richer sense of the empirical, and that the academy as it stood could not be the primary site of antiracist social criticism and knowledge production. This radical empiricist turn informs his claim in an essay from 1905 that "facts are elusive things," which is to say that one can do justice to the richness and depth of human experience only if statistics and official documents are supplemented by encounters with expressive and vernacular culture.<sup>59</sup> This radical empiricist turn paved the way for Du Bois to take up journalism and culture work as alternative paths to uplift. His editorial writing, commissions, and selections in the *Crisis* helped forge a nationwide and transnational black counterpublic, as did his own work as an artist, curator, and culture worker. He dramatized the life of anti-imperial struggle in the novel *Dark Princess* (while also enacting an oddly masculinist and orientalist vision of Afro-Asian solidarity); he mounted the massive Star of Ethiopia pageants as an alternative to the hegemonic vision of African diasporic life and history;<sup>60</sup> and he worked with Jesse Fauset at the *Crisis* to try to shape the "New Negro" aesthetic from the editor's desk, with commissions, criticism, and support.

Impressed by his travels in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the mid-twenties and edified by his reading of Marx and Freud, Du Bois eventually exchanged his radical empiricism for an anticolonial materialism. He traced the problems of modernity to deeply rooted, subconscious habits, dialectically intertwined with powerful economic and psychocultural forces, all actively blocking the pursuit of justice and truth. The most striking example of this epistemological reorientation is *Black Reconstruction*, which reveals Du Bois's determination not just to gather facts but also to put old facts, and the work of producing facts, in a new, recognizably Marxian light. This study of the aftermath of the Civil War does not just contest the distortions of white supremacist history but also insists on the political imperatives that have systematically corrupted the work of knowledge production. Hence this remarkable passage near the end of the book:

I stand at the end of this writing, literally aghast at what American historians have done to this field. . . . We shall never have a science of history until we have in our colleges [scholars] who regard the truth as more important than the defense of the

58 W. E. B. Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," in *What the Negro Wants*, ed. Rayford W. Logan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 53.

59 "Sociology Hesitant" (1905), in *boundary* 2 27, no. 3 (2000): 37–44.

60 David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). See esp. chap. 3, "'The Pageant Is the Thing': Black Nationalism and the Star of Ethiopia," 81–94.

white race, and who will not deliberately encourage students to gather thesis material in order to support a prejudice or buttress a lie.<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusion

Du Bois's late-career attempt to rescue truth-seeking from white supremacist propaganda helpfully marks an overarching concern that has so far lurked in the background of this summary of his political thought. His forceful reflections on historical method resulted from his determination to bring political critique to bear on the mainstream institutions of knowledge production. He saw this as an important undertaking not just because those institutions had helped to oppress specific populations that he cared about but also because they had become obstacles to human flourishing quite generally.

This commitment to the political conditions for universal human flourishing was a constant feature of his thinking from beginning to end. Early on it manifested itself in a Europhilic civilizationism, according to which the key to moral progress was to bring the backward races up to the standards of European civilization (while criticizing Europe for exploiting, reinforcing, and artificially exacerbating this backwardness). Eventually this civilizationism would give way to a Marxian and proto-Afrocentric radicalism. According to this later perspective, Europe's path to civilization was not the only path, in terms either of conceptual possibility or of historical example; and the path that capitalist Europe had chosen was needlessly littered with corpses, conflict, and self-defeating contradictions.

Du Bois's humanist universalism dovetailed with his pragmatic black nationalism. As one would expect from a post-Kantian thinker, his universalism was a concrete universalism, which held that individuals become who and what they are by engaging with historically specific cultural resources in particular communities. The encounter between evolving human persons and evolving cultural contexts is what gives experience its content, which matters politically because for an expressivist like Du Bois, the richness of experience is the basic ethical concern. Du Bois's distinctive contribution to the expressivist tradition is his determination to understand just how race, articulated with gender, class, and nationality (in complicated ways that he struggled to capture adequately), shapes the possibilities for human experience and for social formations that broadly distribute opportunities for "the fullest, most complete enjoyment of the possibilities of human existence."<sup>62</sup>

While Du Bois's focus on race distinguished his expressivism and universalism, the logic of this focus had two key implications for his Afro-modern politics of self-realization. On the one hand, it marked the boundaries of the cultural com-

61 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Propaganda of History" (1935), in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 213.

62 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Revelation of St. Orgne the Damned" (1938), Fisk commencement address, in *Writings*, 1061.

munities that, at their best, expanded the possibilities of human existence. On the other hand, it marked the points at which certain of those communities sought to foreclose the prospects for self-realization in other communities. Over time Du Bois's conceptions of race and of class would evolve in ways that would push him away from reflexively identifying races with culture groups and more toward treating race as a political technology for containing and exploiting populations of subpersons.<sup>63</sup> But relinquishing the thought that races just are cultural groups did not force him to look away from the real and abundant contingent connections between racial populations and specific constellations of cultural groups. Blackness and Africanness were for him closely linked, though not coterminous, as were whiteness and European identity. As he saw it, working through the complexities of linkages like these was one of the crucial burdens not just of what we now call race theory, or even of black political thought and practice, but of modern political thought tout court.

The convergence of black thought, Africana thought, and race theory with modern political thought is a fitting point on which to close this essay. All of Du Bois's political innovations, from the familiar to the relatively obscure, build on a way of thinking and enacting this convergence. His well-known accounts of the color line, of double consciousness, and of racial uplift show his commitment to treating the questions of Afro-modern political thought as questions worth the sort of sustained attention that the social contract has enjoyed. Similarly, his less familiar commitments to unevenly intersectional critique—his vocal but masculinist profeminism and his elaboration of something like racial capitalism—show him connecting race to such pivotal issues in late modern politics as the place of women and of workers in democracy under capitalism.

Du Bois's clearest statement of this convergence, though, may come in *Black Reconstruction*, in a passage that establishes the stakes for his radical innovations in the politics of knowing. What is truly at stake in linking the concerns of Afro-modern theory with putatively broader currents of modern political thought is the prospect of insisting on blackness as a political, and hence as a human, condition, and establishing black persons as political agents and hence as human subjects. As Gordon puts it, "Du Bois rearticulates the relationship of blacks to politics and knowledge in the modern world."<sup>64</sup> Having been invited to take up "the Negro Problem," the Du Bois of *Souls* asks instead how it *feels* to be a problem, which is to say, how being problematized registers for a particular kind of human person, and what sociopolitical conditions frame and underwrite this sort of transaction.

63 On subpersons, see Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). On race as technology, see Falguni Sheth, *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009).

64 Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 77.

Years later, at the beginning of his monumental repudiation of the American historical profession, he would enact even more clearly the founding move of black politics in an antiblack world: "I am going to tell this story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience."<sup>65</sup>

65 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, xliii.

# 11: Marcus Garvey

## The Black Prince?

Michael Dawson

*“Princes shall come out of Egypt and Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto God.” At this moment methinks I see Ethiopia stretching forth her hands unto God, and methinks I see the Angel of God taking up the standard of the Red, the Black and the Green, and saying “Men of the Negro Race, Men of Ethiopia, follow me.”*

***Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, 1:96***

*And, if as I have said, it was necessary for anyone wanting to see the virtue of Moses that the people of Israel be enslaved in Egypt, and to learn the greatness of spirit of Cyrus, that the Persians be oppressed by the Medes, and to learn the excellence of Theseus, that the Athenians be dispersed, so at present to know the virtue of an Italian spirit it was necessary that Italy be reduced to the condition in which she is at present, which is more enslaved than the Hebrews, more servile than the Persians, more dispersed than the Athenians, without a head, without order, beaten, despoiled, torn pillaged, and having endured ruin of very sort.*

***Machiavelli, The Prince, 26:102***

*Marcus Garvey was the first man of color in the history of the United States to lead and develop a mass movement. He was the first man, on a mass scale, and level, to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny, and make the Negro feel that he was somebody.*

***Martin Luther King Jr., 1965***

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

During the mid-1970s I attended a program in the Los Angeles black community organized by a variety of predominantly Asian American, Latinx, and white radicals. In a slide show on the history of the black liberation movement, a slide was shown depicting Marcus Garvey and his organization, the Universal Negro

<sup>1</sup> This essay is related to a larger project on theories of twentieth-century black political leadership. The larger project also examines black feminism in much more depth than suggested here, as well as the black radical instantiation of the modern prince. This version of the essay does not examine modes of leadership common within the past century's black liberation movements.

Improvement Association (UNIA). Many of the nonblack radicals in the crowd booed the picture, immediately generating visible (and audible) anger among the predominantly black audience. Even a half century after the height of the Garvey movement, his influence was great enough to provoke very strong opposition among (nonblack) radicals (and liberals) and strong support within the black community.

Marcus Garvey is a critical figure for understanding black politics during the twentieth century. Garvey was the progenitor of the strongest black nationalist movements of that century, including the largest urban black movement in history—the latter spearheaded by his own UNIA. Garvey's thought influenced organizations and leaders directly including Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam, as well as the myriad Pan-African black nationalist organizations of the 1960s and 1970s. He also indirectly influenced organizations such as the Black Panther Party (who drew much of their inspiration from Malcolm X). Garvey's movement and thought posed sharp answers to the two fundamental questions that Robert Gooding-Williams claimed Du Bois poised as central to black politics: "What kind of politics should African Americans conduct to cope with white supremacy?" and "What kind of leadership should African Americans leaders exercise to cope with white supremacy?"<sup>2</sup> Further, Garvey's thought is centered on another question that Gooding-Williams argues consumed Du Bois. That question can be generalized as "How can the African American people be led in order to facilitate their transformation into a political community capable of challenging and overcoming white supremacy?" These questions were at the heart of what Gooding-Williams characterized as the African American modern philosophical tradition, and were also central to the practice of black politics for much of the first seven decades of the twentieth century.

These questions remain relevant even under the changed conditions we find today. The anger that erupted between 2012 and 2015 over the murders of blacks such as Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown by both vigilantes and the state, as well as the deep economic crisis that plagued black communities ravaged by predatory financial institutions and the general collapse of the post-2007 US economy, point to a continuing deep crisis within black communities in the United States. The character of the ongoing and long-lasting crisis in black politics can be found in Antonio Gramsci's general description of long-lived crises. He argued, "[The] exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them within certain limits, and to overcome them."<sup>3</sup> The question

2 Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 28.

3 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971), 178.

of what form of leadership is best suited to the crises black communities face in these times with continuing, if changed, structures of white supremacy is just as relevant for us as it was during Garvey's era.

Garvey's answer to the question of what form of leadership blacks needed flowed from his overall analysis of the plight of Africans throughout the world. Unlike many of the other black leaders primarily based in the US, Garvey argued that the task of black liberation should be viewed on a global scale, with no area outside of the African continent being particularly privileged.<sup>4</sup> This view led directly to his emphasis on Pan-African solutions to the worldwide problem of black exploitation and oppression. The only solution available to people of African descent according to Garvey was to return to the homeland and found a black republic as blacks globally exercised their right to self-determination. This new republic would be a racial state won by a black nationalist movement. Race was the key analytical category for analyzing power dynamics in the world, and the highest fulfillment of racial aspirations could be achieved only through the founding of a state. This founding must be won and maintained through the formation of armed forces built by and for African peoples. This African state of a new type would be led by a "Negro Moses." A black prince would emerge, sweep aside the old corrupt leadership of black people in the United States, and lead African peoples worldwide to victory.

Hundreds of thousands of African Americans found Garvey's answers more persuasive than those of his rivals (or their political and theoretical heirs), yet as Steven Hahn argues, the history of the Garvey movement has been ignored by scholars, many of whom, according to Hahn, harbor a strong dislike for Garvey and Garveyism.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, Garvey's political thought is even more understudied than the UNIA's history. This dislike has harmed both scholarship and politics, undermining our ability to understand Garvey's thought. More than his contemporaries, Garvey understood, to use Wolin's phrase, "the [discursive] price of persuasion" for winning over the black grassroots.<sup>6</sup> Garvey grasped in practice Wolin's point that "like other forms of discourse, political theory is relevant only when it is intelligible."<sup>7</sup> Early twentieth-century blacks in North America found Garvey's thought more intelligible than that of either his social democratic or Marxist rivals.

Garvey's political thought, like that of Du Bois, is focused on the questions outlined above. Yet Garvey's theory stands in stark contrast, as Gooding-Williams indicates, to those of Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois. For Gooding-

4 Detailed analysis of Garvey's thought will be conducted later in this essay.

5 Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

6 Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, exp. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 176.

7 Wolin, *Politics and Vision*. 176.

Williams, a central component of black politics as a *praxis* as well as a central component of modern African American political thought is the understanding of the role of leadership within black politics. Despite the vast differences between Du Bois's and Douglass's understanding of black politics that Gooding-Williams documents, both fall loosely within the liberal strands of African American modern political thought.<sup>8</sup> The same cannot be said of Garvey's thought. Indeed Garvey's solutions to the problem of white supremacy and that of leadership were radically different than the answers supplied by either Douglass or Du Bois. While one may argue that Garvey's thought included strong elements of republicanism, it did not demonstrate the same affinity for liberalism.

This essay argues for reading Garvey's political thought through the lens of Machiavelli—particularly as interpreted by Gramsci and Althusser. Building on Gooding-Williams, I understand Garvey as confronting head on a central question of black politics and republican thought: **How does one provide leadership to an oppressed population in order to forge a people capable of founding and maintaining an entirely new state of their own free from the domination of others?** Garvey argued that the only solution to white supremacy and the worldwide oppression of Africans and people of African descent was to forge a state of their own—to exercise black self-determination on a worldwide scale. Self-determination would be exercised through the founding of a black state. For this state to be successfully founded, Garvey argued, black people need a particular type of leadership—the black prince. I argue that Garvey's understanding of the black prince is very close to Machiavelli's understanding of *the prince*, but by the early twentieth century Garvey's theoretical solution to the question of leadership was inadequate to the tasks facing the black liberation movements of his time.

I also argue that Gramsci's modern prince provided an alternative model of leadership that many organizations with large numbers of radical, often Marxist, black Americans adopted and adapted between 1930 and 1980. While a more effective leadership model than Garvey's, black insurgent adoption of the model of the modern prince also proved highly problematic for black liberation and American radical politics more generally. More promising theoretical models of democratic leadership can be found in the work of Arendt as well as within the texts and practice of black feminist movements and leaders.

First, I briefly outline the enduring significance of Garvey's thought for twentieth-century black politics in the US while also providing some historical context. Next, I demonstrate that Garvey's political thought and project had much in common with Machiavelli's thought, particularly the latter as interpreted by Gramsci and Althusser. Then I briefly describe how Gramsci's conception of a modern prince was adopted by one strand of black radicals throughout the twen-

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), for a discussion of a typology of black political ideologies.



tieth century due to both their rejection of Garveyism and their positive motivations for adopting Gramsci's version of the prince. I conclude by demonstrating the inadequacies of both versions of the prince for black politics and suggest that for all the powerful attraction that Garvey's thought and movement had for those engaged in the politics of black liberation, we must search elsewhere for theoretical guidance as we address a new, neoliberal racial order.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Background and Influence

Marcus Garvey provides arguably the best model for understanding the theory and practice of twentieth-century black nationalism. There are many competing images and interpretations of Garvey's political thought and practice. Molefi Asante in *Afrocentricity* categorically states, "Garveyism, . . . was the most perfect, consistent, and brilliant ideology of liberation in the first half of the 20th Century. In no nation in the world was there a philosophical treatment of oppressed people any more creative than Garveyism."<sup>10</sup> Howard-Pitney describes Garveyism as "a potent black civil religion promulgating the idea that there was no promising future for blacks in America."<sup>11</sup> Wilson Moses, on the other hand, depicts Garvey as a fairly orthodox descendant of nineteenth-century conservative black nationalists who "appealed to the emotions more than reason, [so] that for many it [Garveyism] was more of a religious than a political experience."<sup>12</sup>

Garvey, who led the largest organization in African American history, presents an analytical problem for both his followers and his detractors. As Steven Hahn correctly argues, "[Garveyism] left its mark on every major black social and political movement of the twentieth century (here and abroad) and was an influence (often the dominant influence) on every form of popular black nationalism in the United States from the Nation of Islam to the Black Panthers."<sup>13</sup> Why don't we know about this rich legacy? I agree with Hahn that at least for "mainstream" scholarship, "a [biased] liberal integrationist framework and narrative" is responsible.<sup>14</sup>

The UNIA's influence was certainly due in part to the substantial degree to which Garvey's thought resonated with blacks in the US and elsewhere. This fact

9 See Michael C. Dawson and Megan Ming Francis, "Black Politics and the Neoliberal Racial Order," *Public Culture* 28, no. 1 (2016): 23-62, for an analysis and definition of the concept of a neoliberal racial order.

10 Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, rev. ed. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 16.

11 David Howard-Pitney, *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

12 Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 264.

13 Hahn, *Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, 118.

14 Hahn, *Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, 159.

is one that his detractors either ignored or dismissed due to the alleged “backwardness” of African Americans in the early twentieth century. But as Asante persuasively argues, “Garvey made sense, commonsense to the people; they went for [Garvey’s] position because it rang true.”<sup>15</sup>

It was the UNIA’s massive organizational base that provided the mechanism for the spread of Garvey’s brand of black nationalism. By 1922 there were over a thousand UNIA divisions (chapters), and the organization would continue to grow.<sup>16</sup> Most of the organization’s divisions were in the US, but there were a substantial number throughout Africa and the Diaspora. What Hahn’s research has empirically documented is two critical and under appreciated facts about the US membership. First there were a substantial number of divisions concentrated in the South, and second where most of the members were either urban or rural laborers. Garveyism had broad support throughout the working and lower middle classes in rural as well as urban areas. Critics of Garveyism have to understand what it is about his political thought that made such stringent black nationalism popular to many African Americans not only at the beginning of the twentieth century *but also at the end of the century*.

Supporters of Garveyism would also be well advised to study his political thought from multiple angles in order to understand why his political program lost support and fell so quickly into organizational oblivion. His unrelenting and uncritical support of nationalism and nationalist movements led him to support struggles that ranged in content from Gandhi’s anticolonial struggles in India to Mussolini’s Fascist regime in Italy (Garvey withdrew support from the latter when Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935).<sup>17</sup> Worse, with respect to building support among blacks in the US, he met in Atlanta with the acting imperial wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan during June 1922. At a time when civil rights organizations such as the NAACP were fighting the resurgent Klan and particularly the wave of lynchings that had claimed at least three thousand black lives since the end of the Civil War, blacks across the political spectrums deemed meeting with the Klan incomprehensible and detestable, if not downright treasonous.<sup>18</sup> This essay attempts to probe the core of Garvey’s thought for the elements that could lead it to garner such broad support *and* provide the basis for the organization’s drastic decline as a major force, if not the decline (at least for several decades) of black nationalism more generally as a widely influential ideology.

I argue that our understanding of Garvey and some strands of black nation-

<sup>15</sup> Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Hahn, *Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*.

<sup>17</sup> Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Grant, *Negro with a Hat*; see Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), for an excellent analysis of the NAACP’s antilynching campaign in the early twentieth century and its effects on American state institutions as well as on the development of the NAACP itself.

alism can be sharpened by a comparison of Garvey's and Machiavelli's political theories.<sup>19</sup> The question I address is not mainly whether Garvey consciously drew from Machiavelli's teaching, although this is a moderately interesting question. Some scholars have suggested, for example, that he drew from and parodied many of Plato's works.<sup>20</sup> The question of origins is important for this project, although not critical, because it is useful for genealogical purposes to know the degree to which Western philosophy influenced the seminal figure in twentieth-century black nationalism given black nationalists' propensity for claiming "authenticity" by adhering to an ideology that they claim—unlike Marxism, feminism, or liberalism—remains uncontaminated by Euro-American thought. More important, however, than the question of the origins of Garvey's political thought is the degree to which there are parallels between Garvey's and Machiavelli's projects. For analyzing Machiavelli, I argue, will help us understand the strengths and weaknesses of Garvey's theory and practice. I present two types of evidence. Textual evidence from *The Prince* will be considered, but first evidence from Garvey's life will be reviewed to set the context within which Garveyism functioned as a body of political thought, political practices, and organizational instantiation.

### 3. Historical Background on Marcus Garvey<sup>21</sup>

It was a period of great unrest, of disillusionment and despair; a time when fevered apparitions of an apocalypse obscured any sighting of the Promised Land; and an age, the *New York Bee* believed, that cried out for a Negro Moses.<sup>22</sup>

Garvey's thought developed and his movement took root during a period within the US when political lynchings were common and blacks' wearing the uniform of the US military too often led to murder by infuriated white mobs. The Red Summer of 1919 saw massive attacks on black communities which can only be understood as pogroms by mobs of white racists in cities as large as Chicago to as small as Elaine, Arkansas. Outside of the United States, blacks faced oppression and exploitation either in the Diaspora or in an Africa colonized and dominated by European powers. This was the context within which Garvey's thought and practice developed.

19 On Machiavelli's political theory see Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University of Press, 1978).

20 Robert A. Hill and Barbara Blair, introduction to *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons—A Centennial Companion to the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, ed. Robert A. Hill and Barbara Blair (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1987] 1990), xv–xlii.

21 The historical material for this section is drawn primarily from the historical works of Grant, *Negro with a Hat*; Hahn, *Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*; Moses, *Golden Age of Black Nationalism*; and Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

22 Grant, *Negro with a Hat*, 116.

Garvey was born in 1887 in Jamaica and died in London in 1940. By the time Garvey was in his early twenties, he was organizing and writing about working-class issues. His travels to Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, and Venezuela helped transform him into a Pan-Africanist nationalist.<sup>23</sup> He went to England in 1912, and on his return to the Western Hemisphere he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1914 under the slogan “One God! One Aim! One Destiny!” He initially wanted to come to the United States in order to meet and work with Booker T. Washington. He entered New York, though, on March 23, 1916, after Washington’s 1915 death and traveled and began organizing in New York. By 1917 the Harlem branch had two thousand members, and by 1919 there were thirty US branches. Eventually the UNIA would spread to thirty-nine states. The organization published the weekly *Negro World*, which had as its creed “Africa must be redeemed and all of us must pledge our manhood, wealth, and blood to this sacred cause.” Even though the paper was banned in Africa by the colonial powers, it was extremely influential throughout the African world. He continued the Pan-Africanist work through several UNIA-sponsored conferences. Five Pan-Africanist congresses were held between 1920 and 1929. The first conference had twenty-five thousand delegates from twenty-five countries and four continents. In the States, the UNIA founded a church and several economic institutions in 1920. Unfortunately, the crown jewel of the economic enterprises, the Black Star [shipping] Line, helped contribute to Garvey’s downfall. The Black Star Line was bankrupt by 1922, and mismanagement by several associates led to fraud charges by the government and Garvey’s eventual imprisonment—an imprisonment that several leading African American leaders applauded.<sup>24</sup> Colonial and American pressure in Africa was also decisive in smashing the UNIA and Garvey. Liberia was initially very supportive of Garvey’s back-to-Africa initiatives, but imperialist pressures led Liberia to cut all ties in 1924. In 1925 Garvey started his five-year sentence. After he left jail in 1927 and was expelled from the United States, Garvey’s movement splits between American and other branches in 1929.<sup>25</sup> Garvey moved to London in 1935 and died there in 1940.

Garvey had influenced key twentieth-century African and African Diaspora leaders, activists, and theorists. Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (Ghana’s first postindependence leader), and George Padmore of the Pan-

23 Hollis R. Lynch, preface to *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, ed. Amy Jacques Garvey, vols. 1–2 (New York: Atheneum, 1986).

24 Here I have in mind W. E. B. Du Bois’s, A. Philip Randolph’s, Cyril Briggs’s, and others’ vicious rivalries with Garvey and in some cases outright participation in the state’s efforts to jail Garvey.

25 Melissa Castillo-Garsow, “Afro-Latin@ Nueva York: Maymie de Mena and the Unsung Afro-Latina Leadership of the UNIA,” in *Afro-Latin@s in Movement: Critical Approaches to Blackness and Transnationalism in the Americas*, ed. Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, Jennifer A. Jones, and Tianna S. Paschel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 141–70.

Africanist movement all cited him as important influences in their own careers. Several streams of black nationalism are found in Garvey's work. First, the Pan-Africanist stream of black nationalism was not promoted better by anyone in the twentieth century than by Marcus Garvey. While he did not make black repatriation back to Africa "respectable," his dream of a single African free state and a strong African motherland had mass appeal and influenced African leaders such as Nkrumah well into the 1960s. Second, Garvey combined economic and cultural nationalism on a scale arguably more successful in the short run than that of the Nation of Islam—again, a key difference was his ability to transform these ideas into a major mass movement. But third, unlike the Black Muslims, Garvey promoted a political program. This was both a strength and a weakness. He promoted a clear program for international African liberation that with some justification could be called **African Zionism**, both because he linked the African motherland to the worldwide oppression of people of African descent and because he called for a political movement and political return in opposition to the great European powers of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, for Garvey and his movement there was a radical disjuncture between his political program and the movement and organization he built. Further, a lack of analysis of the American state in particular led him, like most black nationalists, to seriously underestimate the state's ability to destroy him and his movement *and* find other blacks to cooperate in its attempt to destroy black nationalist movements. Tragically, Garvey was the only black nationalist leader to build a mass movement inside of the United States. But even the character of the mass movement was problematic. His mass movement, like that of Martin Luther King Jr., was based on a metaphysical view of a future utopia. However, Garvey's movement was not a political one. Garvey articulated aspects of an international and domestic political program, but this political program was not well connected to the mass movement that he built. Garveyites were not organized for *political* struggle and could therefore not effectively defend either Garvey or their movement. There was a radical disjuncture between the political and other components of Garvey's movement. This proved to be a fatal flaw.

#### 4. The Black Prince

Look for me in the whirlwind of the storm, look for me all around you, for, with God's grace, I shall come and bring with me countless millions of black slaves who

<sup>26</sup> Metropole observers of the post-World War I Pan-African and Pan-Islamic movements were well aware of the parallels between Zionism and Garveyism. French author Maurice Muret commented on Garvey, "He proclaims the gospel of 'Africa for the African' on the model of Zionism, which preaches Palestine for the Jews." Du Bois also made a similar claim: "The African movement means to us what the Zionist movement must mean to the Jews" (both quoted in Moses, *Golden Age of Black Nationalism*, 253, 143).

have died in America and the West Indies and the millions in Africa to aid you in the fight for Liberty, Freedom, and Life.<sup>27</sup>

I asked “where is the black man’s Government?” “Where is his King and kingdom?” “Where is his President, his country, and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs?” I could not find them, and then I declared, “I will help make them.”<sup>28</sup>

The core of Garvey’s thought was centered on the belief that blacks in the US and elsewhere could not determine their own future or live without being oppressed unless they had their own country governed by their own people. He believed that nationalism was the trend of the future, and black nationalism the only ideology guaranteed to protect black rights and aspirations. Further, nations were constituted by races of people:

You will realize as a serious group of people that you are living in a serious age in a serious world—a world without sympathy—a world without charity, a world without love; a selfish, heartless world. This world in which we live is divided up into separate and distinct national groups. It is also divided into great human groups. Each and everyone of these national groups, and each and every one of these many race groups is fighting for its own interests; fighting for those things that are dear to it.<sup>29</sup>

Only Africa represented a suitable and safe physical site for the founding of a strong African state capable of defending black people and allowing black the opportunity to truly flourish. Each race had its own destiny, and it was time for the black race to take its place on the world stage. Finally, a powerful black movement with strong leadership was needed in order to found the African state that could bring black people out of the worldwide oppression within which they found themselves. This movement would need a leader who recognized that Africans lived in “a selfish, heartless world,” a leader who recognized the potential of a moment when a strong African nation had the potential to be forged.

A key question for the black politics of Garvey’s time and for now is “When can the conditions for awakening and developing a national-popular collective will be said to exist?”<sup>30</sup> Garvey employs what Gramsci describes as Machiavelli’s method. Gramsci states, “Machiavelli should be considered. . . . as closely tied to the conditions and exigencies of his time.”<sup>31</sup>

27 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, 239.

28 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, 126.

29 Marcus Garvey, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Bob Blaisdell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 37.

30 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 130.

31 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 140.

Garvey also believed that innovators must, to use a phrase from a later period of the Black Liberation Movement, seize the time and take advantage of the “conditions and exigencies of his time.” The moment is critical, much as Machiavelli, Gramsci, and particularly Althusser argue about the importance of the moment with respect to Renaissance Italy as Machiavelli notes in the epigraph that opens this chapter. At the time of the conjuncture, not only had the people of Italy been oppressed and weak on the world stage—often the prey of the likes of France and Spain—but the solution was also at hand. For Renaissance Italy the solution was in the example of France—the founding of the nation-state through the use of one’s own arms. Althusser continues with respect to the “problem” facing Machiavelli: “The meaning of all the elements of the conjuncture changes: they become real or potential forces in the struggle for the historical objective, and their relations become relations of force.”<sup>32</sup> Althusser uses the language of “conjuncture” to denote the contradictory aspects of a moment when a people are oppressed and downtrodden, but due to their very circumstances their emancipation is at hand if they can seize the time. Specifically Althusser argues, “The conjuncture is thus no mere summary of its elements, or enumeration of diverse circumstances, but *their contradictory system*, which poses the political problem and indicates its historical solution.”<sup>33</sup> Andreas Kalyvas argues that a state founded during the rupture made possible by the conjuncture must represent a radically new order. He argues, “[A] new order is born out of nothingness and, as such, it represents a total rupture with the previous system of legality. It cannot be reduced or traced back to any anterior procedure, institution, or fundamental norm. It constitutes a new revolutionary form of legitimacy based on completely new rounds. It signifies the beginning of a new political regime.”<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, Garvey sees the depths to which the black race has sunk as the foundation for something new and powerful: “Ethiopia shall once more arise from the ashes of material ruin to the heights of temporal glory. We see a new Ethiopia, a new Africa, stretching her hands of influence throughout the world, teaching man the way of life and peace, the way to God.”<sup>35</sup> One can see quite clearly in Garvey’s analysis his anticipation of Althusser’s description, following Machiavelli, of reasoning under the *conjuncture*: the problem, the fragmentation and colonialization of Africa and the oppression of African peoples throughout the world; the solution, for a race to obtain greatness it must obtain the highest form of the people, the state, and for those states that have been defeated or are weak for other reasons (such as Germany, Italy, or Russia), **the answer is an authoritarian nationalism—**

32 Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us* (London: Verso, 1999), 19.

33 Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, emphasis in the original.

34 Andreas Kalyvas, “Hegemonic Sovereignty: Carl Schmitt, Antonio Gramsci and the Constituent Prince,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5, no. 3 (2010): 347.

35 Garvey, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, 125.

the nationalist Prince—often embodied in a single person, an exemplar of *virtù* (including, for Garvey, Lenin, Mussolini, and later Hitler).<sup>36</sup>

Indeed for Machiavelli, the only role that *fortuna* plays is providing the moment, the conjuncture, within which the would-be prince can exhibit his *virtù* through great deeds of founding. Specifically he argues, “One does not see that they had anything else from fortune than the opportunity, which gave them the matter enabling them to introduce any form that they pleased. Without that opportunity their virtue of spirit would have been eliminated, and without that virtue the opportunity would have come in vain.”<sup>37</sup> Machiavelli further argues that “he who has relied less on fortune has maintained himself more.”<sup>38</sup> Garvey also directly attacks the notion of reliance on chance when he states, “Chance has never yet satisfied the hope of a suffering people. Action, self-reliance, the vision of self and the future have been the only means by which the oppressed have seen and realized the light of their own freedom.”<sup>39</sup> According to both Garvey and Machiavelli, fortune provides the opportunity of revolutionary times, but it is the deeds of the prince that are crucial for determining whether a people becomes free.

Garvey’s thought was greatly influenced by the political currents of the time. It was a time of nationalism and revolution, of war and peace, of talk of self-determination and what Garvey saw as nationalist movements in Ireland and India—a time new states were being founded often amid the violence of civil wars and struggles against colonial power. New states were being founded out of the remnants of old empires such as those of the czars, Ottomans, and Hapsburgs. It was a revolutionary era, Garvey believed, much like that described by Machiavelli (and Gramsci—a contemporary), a moment of a people coming together to found something entirely new whether it was in Bolshevik Russia, Republican Ireland, or Fascist Italy. It was a monumental strength and weakness of Garvey that he understood that this was a moment of founding while simultaneously demonstrating a lack of concern about the content of those movements. Foundational to Garvey’s thought is the belief that self-determination is the key to a future free from domination. For Garvey, and many of the political leaders on the international stage at his time, the tumultuous time demanded self-determination as the solution to the problem of the oppression of nations, nations in formation, or would-be nations.

Garvey continued a long black radical tradition of insisting on self-determination as the foundation for freedom. For example, one key predecessor was African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, who stated, “No race will ever be respected, or ought to be respected who do not show themselves capable of founding and manning a government of their own cre-

36 Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 19.

37 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 23.

38 Machiavelli, *Prince*, 22.

39 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, 1.



ation.”<sup>40</sup> The goal of self-determination could be realized, according to Garvey, only through mobilization: “We are first trying to organize these [millions] . . . with one object of a free and redeemed Africa.”<sup>41</sup> But, he continued, this would not happen until “Africa finds a Napoleon.”<sup>42</sup>

For Garvey, the selection of Napoleon as a virtuous example served multiple purposes. Certainly Garvey viewed Napoleon as an excellent exemplar of the strong Machiavellian founder. It was not just that aspect of Napoleon, however, that resonated with Garvey. Garvey argued that current forms of the state such as democracy and communism had failed or were failing.<sup>43</sup> In his essay “Governing the Ideal State,” he calls for the new African state leader to be an elected autocrat with near limitless power, and a lifestyle that would keep him (Garvey’s discussion in the same essay of the role of “First Ladies” makes it clear that the autocrat is to be male), his family, and ministers free from the temptation of corruption. “Government should be absolute,” Garvey argues.<sup>44</sup> The state is personified in and through its leader; “his only friends outside of his immediate family should be the State [*sic*].”

Similarly, Althusser in his discussion of chapter 9 of *The Prince* argues that Machiavelli’s Prince “must be alone if he wishes to organize a new republic.”<sup>45</sup> He continues by quoting directly from Machiavelli that for the Prince “it is necessary to be *alone* to found a new republic or completely reform it.”<sup>46</sup>

Hill argues persuasively that Garvey’s political thought was also substantially influenced by that of the ancient Greeks—particularly Aristotle and Plato. Specifically, with respect to Garvey’s views on rule and leadership as examined in this essay, Garvey’s autocrat is “what Aristotle termed an absolute kingship.”<sup>47</sup> Africa’s Napoleon, however, had not yet been acclaimed.

Garvey argues that “we have not yet found the leaders worthy of leadership of a great race like the Negro race.”<sup>48</sup> The problem is that the leadership of the black race is corrupt; he says in a 1921 speech reprinted in the *Negro World*: “The leadership of the past has been a leadership more destructive than constructive—a leadership that misrepresented the true desires, the true hopes of ours.”<sup>49</sup> According to Garvey, liberals such as Du Bois, social democrats such as A. Philip Randolph, and black Marxists such as those of the African Blood Brotherhood and the young

40 Henry McNeal Turner to Editor, *Christian Recorder*, February 22, 1883. The AME denomination and the black Baptists are the two historic mainline denominations within which African Americans have worshiped.

41 Hahn (quoting Garvey), *Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, 132.

42 Hahn (quoting Garvey), *Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, 132.

43 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, pt. 2.

44 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, 75.

45 Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 63.

46 Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 64.

47 Hill and Blair, introduction to *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*, xli.

48 Garvey, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, 38.

49 Garvey, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, 38–39.

CPUSA were all beholden to white/European interests whether those interests were based on Wall Street or in the newly founded Soviet Union. These leaders could do little to help black folks, and usually led them treacherously down paths that proved disastrous.

What type of leader did Garvey call for to lead black people to the Promised Land? Garvey's prince sees the world clearly, would not shrink from what needs to be done—the moral imperative is to free black people by any means necessary—has an understanding of the role of fortune, and understands the need for being radical, and as a consequence accepts a life alone and perhaps persecuted. The Black Prince must be a singular and exceptional leader—one who will stand firm and with a clear eye in “a world without charity.”

#### A CERTAIN TYPE OF MAN

The Black Prince must be a “certain type of man,” because according to Garvey few men are capable of founding a new nation. It is clear what traits Garvey sees as necessary for a founder. *Philosophy and Opinions* is filled with references to the successful leaders of the time, such as Lenin. He declares:

In the process of time we find that only a certain type of man has been able to make good in God's creation. We find them building nations, governments and empires, as also great monuments of commerce, industry and education (these men realizing the power given them exerted every bit of it to their own good and to their posterity's) while, on the other hand, 400,000,000 Negroes who claim the common Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, have fallen back so completely, as to make us today the serfs and slaves of those who fully know themselves and have taken control of the world, which was given to all in common by the Creator.<sup>50</sup>

Only a radical, Garvey argues, has sufficient will to be a founder capable of leading “400,000,000 Negroes” to freedom.

#### RADICALISM, DANGER, AND THE PRINCE

**A true prince must break completely with the past and be willing to take the necessary measures to found a new state and fight its inevitable enemies.** A Prince, therefore, must be radical and must welcome the danger that will surely be his lot:

“Radical” is a label that is always applied to people who are endeavoring to get freedom. Jesus Christ was the greatest radical the world ever saw. He came and saw a world of sin and his program was to inspire it with spiritual feeling. He was

50 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, 24–25.

therefore a radical. George Washington was dubbed a radical when he took up his sword to fight his way to liberty in America one hundred and forty years ago. All men who call themselves reformers are perforce radicals. They cannot be anything else, because they are revolting against the conditions that exist. Conditions as they exist reveal a conservative state, and if you desire to change these conditions you must be a radical. I am, therefore, satisfied to be the same kind of radical, if through radicalism I can free Africa.<sup>51</sup>

Machiavelli argues that being a radical, an innovator is dangerous, as “nothing is more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than to put oneself at the head of introducing new orders.”<sup>52</sup>

Radicals seeking to change the world have to be willing to do what is necessary and have a clear vision of the present as well as the future. Therefore, critical to be being a prince for both Garvey and Machiavelli is the ability to understand human nature and act accordingly. Garvey declares that policy must be based on an understanding of human sinfulness. He states:

I am not one of those Christians who believe that the Bible can solve all the problems of humanity. The Bible is good in its place, but we are men. We are the creatures of God. We have sinned against Him, therefore it takes more than the Bible to keep us in our places. Man is becoming so vile that to-day we cannot afford to convert him with moral, ethical, physical truths alone, but with that which is more effective—implements of destruction.<sup>53</sup>

This again echoes Machiavelli: man is flawed, man’s true nature is such that morality is insufficient, force is needed to produce virtue. Garvey’s view of humanity’s nature is why, like Machiavelli, he often discusses the need for the new state to have its own armed forces. Compare that passage to Machiavelli’s famous opening of the chapter “Of Those Things for Which Men and Especially Princes Are Praised or Blamed”: “He who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity.”<sup>54</sup>

Given Garvey’s views on the sinful nature of humanity, we should not find surprising his views on the need for force and violence to secure both human rights and a black state—Garvey is a self-conscious realist who rejects idealism, especially among racial leaders who rely on prayer and fortune in the place of

51 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, pt. 1, 17.

52 Machiavelli, *Prince*, 23.

53 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, 9.

54 Machiavelli, *Prince*, 61.

self/group interest and strategy. In a similar spirit Garvey argues, “There is no strength but that which is destructive, because man has lost his *virtues*, and only respects force, which he himself cannot counteract” (emphasis added).<sup>55</sup>

This more stringent view of violence is based on both Garvey’s analysis of human nature, with its distinctly Machiavellian flavor, and his concrete analysis of the situation of Africans in the world. Black oppression flows from power: both European domination of Africa and Africans, *and* Euro-American freedom *from* domination lie in the multiple forms of power wielded by Euro-American nation-states. He asks, “Do they lynch Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans or Japanese?”<sup>56</sup> He answers:

Power is the only argument that satisfies man. It is the naval and political power of Great Britain that keeps her mistress of the seas. It is the commercial and financial power of the United States of America that makes her the greatest banker in the world. Hence it advisable for the Negro to get power of every kind. POWER in education, science, industry, politics and highest government. That kind of power that will stand out signally, so that other races and nations can see, and if they will not see, then FEEL. Man is not satisfied or moved by prayers or petitions, but every man is moved by that power of authority which forces him to do even against his will.<sup>57</sup>

Thus “the only protection against INJUSTICE in man is POWER—physical, financial and scientific.”<sup>58</sup> Consequently, “we must have an African Army second to none and a Navy second to none.”<sup>59</sup> In a “World Gone Mad—Force [is the] Only Argument to Correct Human Ills [the title of a 1923 *Negro World* article by Garvey]” and black freedom can “only be settled by force.” Again, “[‘Human Ills’] can only be settled by force.”<sup>60</sup>

Garvey was writing in the midst of a period of massive attacks on black communities within the US. The Red Summer of 1919, during which black communities large and small were attacked by armed mobs of racist whites, was only four years in the past. Black Tulsa had been burned down by armed mobs only two years earlier, and in January of the year that Garvey wrote (1923), the black community in Rosewood, Florida, had suffered a similar pogrom. Militant and armed defense of black communities was a common theme in black political thought at the time across the spectrum. Black liberals such as Du Bois, Marxists such as Harry Haywood, and black nationalists all affirmed the principle of armed self-

55 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, 4.

56 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, 52.

57 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, 21–22.

58 Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions*, 5.

59 Garvey, quoted in Hahn, *Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, 132

60 Garvey, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, 123.

defense and in many cases practiced it as well. Indeed, in 1919 fellow Jamaican expatriate Claude McKay wrote “If We Must Die,” one of the most famous poems in the black canon, expressing the need to defend black folks by any means necessary. Garvey, however, took these sentiments further than mere self-defense by arguing for the permanent organization of a black military—a military that could exist only if there was an African state.

Garvey agreed with Wolin’s argument (via Machiavelli) that the possession of arms of one’s own can overcome hereditary and other forms of inequality. Machiavelli was discussing the ability of the Prince as a self-made man and the necessity for such arms, but Garvey is discussing how a people, embodied in a prince, can use arms to force their way onto the world scene—equalizing what with respect to worldwide white supremacy was the equivalent to the hereditary power that Wolin refers to in the following passage: “In serving the new men as they scrambled for power, status, and glory, the new science worked as a great equalizer, elevating the comparative position of those who pitted ability against hereditary right.”<sup>61</sup> If, as Wolin claims, Machiavelli’s science was “fundamentally hostile to social distinction and to the aristocratic principle in particular,” Garvey’s thought was particularly hostile to the principle of a world organized on a race principle replacing the aristocratic principle—a system of global white supremacy.<sup>62</sup> Wolin’s argument follows Machiavelli when the latter argues, “And [mastery of arms] is of such virtue that not only does it maintain those who have been born princes, but many times it enables men of private fortune to rise to that rank, and on the contrary, one sees that when princes have thought more of amenities than of arms, they have had lost their states.”<sup>63</sup>

The point that “we must have an African Army second to none” parallels Machiavelli quite closely when the latter argues in chapter 12 of *The Prince* that “mercenaries and auxiliaries are at once useless and dangerous, and he who holds his State by means of mercenary troops can never be solidly or securely seated.”<sup>64</sup> Gramsci makes the same point:

To get a clear understanding of this part of our subject, we must look whether these innovators can stand alone, or whether they depend for aid upon others; in other words, whether to carry out their ends they must resort to entreaty, or can prevail by force. In the former case they always fare badly and bring nothing to a successful issue; but when they depend upon their own resources and can employ force, they seldom fail. Hence it comes that **all armed Prophets have been victorious, and all unarmed Prophets have been destroyed.**<sup>65</sup>

61 Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 180.

62 Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 181.

63 Machiavelli, *Prince*, 58.

64 Machiavelli, *Prince*, 48.

65 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 140.

A key point in this chapter, and one of importance not only to state leaders but also to nationalists and others who see themselves as liberators, is the absolute need to depend on one's own forces and not those of another. The history of the Third World and superpower conflict during the Cold War is instructive in this regard.

Finally, in chapter 22, "Of the Secretaries of Princes," Machiavelli argues, "The choice of ministers is of no small importance to a prince; they are good or not according to the prudence of the prince. And the first conjecture that is to be made in the brain of a lord is to see the men he has around."<sup>66</sup> Here Garvey failed.

#### DISCUSSION

Garvey's project of founding a new state demands a mode of leadership substantially different from those of his key contemporaries such as Du Bois or his most important predecessor, Frederick Douglass. While Garvey draws on a strong republican heritage, his mode of leadership does not fit well with the liberal African American tradition of the time. As different as they are from each other, Du Bois, Douglass, and even Booker T. Washington can all be seen as representing different strains of an African American liberal tradition—a tradition that Garvey explicitly rejects.

Garvey does not conform well to any of the three modes of leadership that Gooding-Williams identifies as Du Bois's: revolt, adjustment, and self-realization. The last of these is the closest to Garvey's, but Garvey's and Du Bois's ideas of self-realization are very different. According to Gooding-Williams, Du Bois's conception of self-realization is centered on self-formation and demanding rights, while I read Garvey as also invested in self-formation, but self-formation in service of founding a new state, not demanding rights where none will be forthcoming.

I agree with Gooding-Williams when he points out that Du Bois's conception of leadership as governance is in direct opposition to Arendt's conception of "leaders not as rulers who oversee, direct, and manage the activity of others, but as initiative-takers who depend on the support of others to accomplish the actions they initiate."<sup>67</sup> They must "avow and embody (and so reflect) the collective, spiritual (folk) identity that antecedently unites black Americans."<sup>68</sup>

Garvey and Du Bois both see as their task the preparation of the black masses for self-rule.<sup>69</sup> Gooding-Williams's description of Du Bois's conception of leadership in many ways seems a far better description *in practice* of Garvey than of Du Bois: "Du Bois's political expressivism asserts that to be effective and authoritative black politics must remember the people, like the prophet Moses, and not simply rule them, like the despotic Bismarck; or, again, that it must add a dose of cultural

66 Machiavelli, *Prince*, 92.

67 Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 11.

68 Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 14.

69 Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 21.

nationalism to its civic nationalism.”<sup>70</sup> Ironically, Garvey was a far more accomplished wielder of the narratives, rituals, and ideology of cultural nationalism (and for that matter civic nationalism) than Du Bois ever was during his career. Only the leadership of the civil rights and to some degree the black power movements came close to matching Garvey on this front. The black social democrats of the civil rights movement came out of the churches and schools of the urban South and relied on a charismatic mode of leadership; and the followers of the two versions of the modern prince—the classical Gramscian model (CPUSA in the 1930s) and what I labeled in *Blacks in and out of the Left* the third path—the black socialist radicals of the early twentieth century and black power eras—combined a concern with economic redistribution with embracing the black spirit of self-determination that also resonated with grassroots blacks. Yet the social democrats of the civil rights movement, the black radicals of the pre-World War II period, and the Black Power era could not match Garvey’s ability to build a mass urban movement throughout the black population of the US.

In a critical way Garvey was closer to the republican and Weberian conceptions of leadership than his contemporaries were, as his conception of black leadership was indeed embodied in a state—a critical aspect for both traditions. Gooding-Williams argues that for Du Bois, Bismarck and Moses are key negative and positive examples—of forming a people and ruling in both cases, but only the latter *expresses* the spirit of the people. Expressing the spirit of the people does not necessitate either trusting the people nor believing in a democratic form of leadership.

Unlike Malcolm X, neither Garvey nor Du Bois trusted the *demos*—Gooding-Williams says Du Bois considered the *demos* unruly (a trait that Malcolm X celebrated). For Du Bois, according to Gooding-Williams, “the behaviors and attitudes of large numbers—frequently, the great majority—of blacks are defective precisely because they do not conform to these moral, economic, juridical, and aesthetic norms, which he thinks lend focus to the project of cultural self-development and normative, organizational coherence to the modern world.” Neither Garvey nor Du Bois is fully a democrat, and both believe that the masses must be ruled by either the one or the few. In this sense Malcolm X was more of a democrat than either Garvey or Du Bois. Malcolm, who set the tone for the insurgency of the late 1960s and 1970s even more than the leadership of the civil rights movement and was organically connected to the black masses, was also far more trusting of the *demos* than of the elites, whom he saw as vacillating and all too often compromised by their own economic and social interests.

#### WHAT IS USEFUL AND WHAT IS NOT

Garvey recognized that radical action was needed to fight the worldwide oppression of people of African descent and that such action must be founded on devel-

70 Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 64–65.

oping political and economic power—black power. He recognized that innovative thinking and new modes of leadership were necessary if blacks were to be able to gain sufficient power to free themselves from domination and exercise self-determination. There is much in the republican thought and specifically within Machiavelli's thought that would be useful for such a project. The insistence on seeing the world as it is was not the least of the contributions that this thought provided. Yet Garvey's view of the world did not correspond to reality in important ways, and one of the reasons for this can be seen in his agreement with one aspect of Machiavelli's thought. Garvey believed that it would be impossible to form a just republic within the confines of an already deeply corrupted republic—the United States. Thus it was necessary to form an all new African state. This venture's low probability of success may not have conformed with perceptions of reality, but then no program for black liberation at that time seemed to have a high probability of success. At least as important was that blacks who for generations had fought and died for justice and equality within the US had little interest in migrating to Africa. Their aspirations and those of Garvey were on this fundamental level incompatible.

Garvey had a genius, history clearly shows, for connecting with the black grassroots throughout the country. He was unrivaled not only in his ability to appeal to both rural and urban black populations but also in turning that support into an organized movement. As Gramsci would argue, one can never underestimate the power of ideas, and "another proposition of the philosophy of praxis" is too easily forgotten: that "popular beliefs and similar ideas are themselves material forces."<sup>71</sup> Garvey arguably turned black "popular belief" into "material forces" more effectively than any of his contemporaries or successors managed to do.

Yet *The Prince* itself and modern black history's history of assassination show conclusively that the ideal of a "prince" should be rejected. The history of the twentieth century has shown us the dangers of cults of personalities and deification of leaders. The traditional prince, Andreas Kalyvas argues, exercised hegemony "by virtue of the charismatic attributes of a single person"; he continues, "The power of the single leader does not have enough duration to accomplish the task of setting a new foundation."<sup>72</sup> This pattern, sadly, was repeated in twentieth-century black politics with not only Garvey but also Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—powerful examples of this limitation of the traditional prince.

Most importantly, that same history demonstrates that humans are flawed, but a new state, the negative history of Leninism teaches us, has to be based on more than a pragmatic view of humanity's sinfulness, or it will be no less oppressive than the state it succeeds. A new morality must be built into the process of liberation if freedom is to become an institutionalized reality.

71 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 165.

72 Kalyvas, "Hegemonic Sovereignty," 359.



### 5. The Modern [Black] Prince: A Solution?

If a Black Prince is not the answer as a mode of leadership suitable for black liberation in the twentieth—or twenty-first—century, what is? The answer to which many of Garvey's rivals and even some of his sympathizers such as Harry Haywood turned was what Antonio Gramsci called the modern prince.<sup>73</sup> Capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy at all levels were organized, and Leninists, including the black instantiation of Leninism within the US, insisted on the strong organization of revolutionary forces to oppose the organized forces of racist capitalist reaction. The best known and archetypical, if highly flawed, instantiation of the modern black prince in twentieth-century black politics was a collective one: the Black Panther Party with its democratic centralist mode of internal rulership.

Here I will describe Gramsci's and Althusser's conception of the modern prince. Next I analyze how the Black Panther Party, used as an exemplar of the many similar black radical formations of the late 1960s and 1970s, fit their conception of the modern prince. Then I evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the modern prince in theory and practice as a mode of black leadership.

One of the critical weaknesses of the Garvey movement, and any other movements dominated by a single charismatic individual, is that the movement is at the mercy of both the weaknesses of the individual leader and the removal of that leader by hostile forces. The Garvey movement suffered from both problems. Althusser argues that Gramsci's conception of the modern prince is developed to address the shortcomings inherent in Machiavelli's model. He states, "Gramsci's Modern Prince is the Marxist-Leninist proletarian party. It is no longer a single individual, and history is no longer at the mercy of this individual's *virtù*."<sup>74</sup> In Althusser's view, Machiavelli is a "partisan" on the side of "the people," for Machiavelli believes that "liberty is better entrusted to the people than to the nobility, because the latter have a 'strong desire to dominate,' whereas the former 'only . . . desire not to be dominated, and as a consequence, [possess] a stronger will to live in liberty.'"<sup>75</sup> Still, Gramsci acknowledged, "the fact remains that there do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led." He goes on to ask, however, "Is it the intention that there should always be rulers and ruled, or is the objective to create the conditions in which this division is no longer necessary? In other words, is the initial premise the perpetual division of the human race, or the belief that this division is only an historical fact, corresponding to certain conditions?"<sup>76</sup> Although the intention of the modern prince might have been to achieve a society where the

73 See Michael Dawson, *Blacks in and out of the Left* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), for a discussion of Harry Haywood's and other early twentieth-century black radicals' turn from Garvey to Marxism-Leninism.

74 Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 13.

75 Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 60.

76 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 144.

distinction between ruler and ruled dissolves, that distinction was still necessary due to the need for a vanguard party to “awaken” and “educate” grassroots forces. Further, according to Gramsci, a key task of the party is to facilitate “awakening new and original forces rather than merely to calculate on the traditional ones”<sup>77</sup> and to “educate” spontaneity.<sup>78</sup>

Even in Machiavelli there is some textual support for the educative role of the prince. Machiavelli argued, “Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus would not have been able to make their people observe their constitutions for long if they had been unarmed, as happened in our times to Brother Girolamo Savonarola. He was ruined in his new orders as soon as the multitude began not to believe in them, and he had no mode for holding firm those who had believed nor for making unbelievers believe.”<sup>79</sup> This is another reason that Gramsci’s modern prince is superior, and the Black Panthers provide both a positive and a negative example. A prince not only must have his own arms but also *must be able to make the people believe*. The Black Panthers provide a more positive example than Garvey because their leaders’ emphasis on winning over the people through education was right out of Gramsci’s playbook. They also provide a negative example: the masculinist overemphasis (indeed one could argue suicidal) reliance on an undertrained, outgunned, and outnumbered “military” was a key, if not exclusive reason, for their destruction. Their comparative advantage, as is hinted at the Black Panther-focused documentary *Seize the Time*, was never the military, despite their image, but their program, which had won broad support within black communities. What Garvey did not understand is the point that Kalyvas repeatedly emphasizes: “The political, social, and cultural environment of modernity does not permit the creation of a new state out of the force and domination that an individual can exercise over he entire social field. *In the modern world, new orders cannot be founded exclusively on the creative will of a single dictator manifested through command and domination, for the appropriate social-historical preconditions are lacking. Instituting dictatorship is an anachronistic strategy of new beginnings.*”<sup>80</sup> This is what Garvey did not understand. What Garvey profoundly misunderstood is that “the foundation of a new state must be hegemonic, that is, popular and participatory.”<sup>81</sup> For Kalyvas, the subject, the political community, is constituted through political struggles, part of

77 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 174.

78 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 198.

79 Machiavelli, *Prince*, 24.

80 Kalyvas, “Hegemonic Sovereignty,” 359 (emphasis added).

81 Kalyvas, “Hegemonic Sovereignty,” 361. It should be noted that Kalyvas points to a strong break between Lenin and Gramsci. The latter, Kalyvas argues, was far more democratic and actively opposed Lenin’s conception of the theory and practice of a communist party. Others, of course, believe that there is far more agreement between Lenin and Gramsci theoretically and practically on the nature of communist parties than Kalyvas admits to. Although I like Kalyvas’s version of a democratic Gramsci, I am not a Gramsci scholar and thus must be agnostic on the accuracy of his reading. Here, therefore, I focus on the substance of Kalyvas’s normative claim, not on their accuracy as a reflection of Gramsci’s thought.

which is the struggle for hegemony: “A hegemonic strategy, for Gramsci, involves the cultural and moral struggle to create a popular constituent subject. Politics is also a ‘cultural battle to transform the popular ‘mentality.’”<sup>82</sup>

The Black Panthers understood better than Garvey the need to educate people in order to have them “believe,” and they embraced this role. As Panther leader Huey P. Newton explained, “The Vanguard Party must provide leadership for the people. It must teach the correct strategic methods of prolonged resistance through literature and activities.”<sup>83</sup>

The vanguard party provided leadership through “democratic centralism.” Democratic centralism in theory had two democratic elements. First, the leadership was selected from the bottom up democratically (at least in a representative sense—each level selected the leadership of the tier above). Second, major decisions were supposed to be determined democratically, either through debate within party units or at periodic congresses. The centralism also had two aspects. First, once a decision was reached everyone was totally committed to implementing the decision—no abstentions or conscientious objections. Second, in between congresses or the meetings of other representative bodies, leadership could issue binding orders. In practice, both internationally and within the black movement, this system degenerated into autocratic leadership, and often, as in the case of the Black Panther Party and its leader Huey P. Newton, a cult of personality that turned a political force that aspired to be democratic into the personal and corrupt tool of its leader. This was a problem for both the Garveyite and Black Panther modes of leadership—respectively, the Prince and the modern prince.

The reasons for adopting this form of organization are completely understandable. Throughout the twentieth century, organizations such as the more activist unions and leftist parties adopted an organizational form that attempted to combine democratic debate with enough central direction to effectively counter extraordinarily powerful and usually vicious antagonists such as large corporations, a capitalist social order, white supremacy, and the racial state. Often the not-so-metaphorical analogy was made that unions and leftist parties were at war, and they constituted the armies that fought on side of the “masses.” As in any army, obedience (centralism) was needed to counter the machinations, resources, strategies, tactics, and firepower of a vicious enemy. But unlike army protocol, at least in theory decisions were to be made and leaders selected through democratic mechanisms. It should not be surprising that former veterans and union members were much more comfortable with democratic centralism than were those with an academic, professional, or otherwise privileged position, who were used to exercising considerable autonomy in their work and private life.

Ultimately, the lack of democracy within the black Left left the Panthers and

82 Kalyvas, “Hegemonic Sovereignty,” 365.

83 Huey P. Newton, “The Correct Handling of a Revolution,” in *The Black Panthers Speak*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1970), 41.

other organizations vulnerable. In a critical area the Black Panther Party fell far short of the Gramscian idea. Gramsci explicitly warned against Vanguardists that did not, as Machiavelli demanded, have armies of their own. The Black Panther Party was an example of what Gramsci labels “‘Vanguards’ without armies to back them up.”<sup>84</sup> Assassinated Chicago Panther leader Fred Hampton warned of another potential problem with vanguardism: “We state that just as fast as the people can possibly go that’s just as fast we can take it. While we take it we must be sure that we are not missing the people in the valley. In the valley, we know that we can learn to understand the life of the people.”<sup>85</sup> Here too the Panthers, and the black left more generally, failed. As murderous state oppression rapidly intensified (including the murder of Fred Hampton in December 1969), the connection to the black grassroots became increasingly tenuous. Many of the black radical organizations that succeeded the Black Panther Party were similarly undemocratic and, albeit through different mechanisms, also became isolated from the black grassroots and disappeared as powerful political forces.

Kalyvas makes a point identical to one I have made elsewhere when he asks, “Will the revolutionary means be compatible with the emancipatory and democratic ends or will they once more be based on coercion, force, and repression?”<sup>86</sup> If Kalyvas is right with respect to Gramsci’s desire to create “a new order and a democratic, consensual, and ethical one, which is the only one appropriate for modern societies,” then the party, the modern prince, is a proper vehicle for black liberation. If he is wrong, then we need to scrutinize the flaws inherent in the modern prince while preserving Gramsci’s aspirations.

## 6. Conclusion: To Rule or to Lead?

Gramsci’s alternative for a model of the modern prince is the Leninist political party that in theory combines democracy and the capacity for central control of the state (as a prince in an earlier era would control the state through the command represented in his person). This is a step in the right direction—collectivization of leadership is an improvement over the cult of personality that marked Garvey’s leadership style. As Ella Baker, the extremely influential civil rights leader, observed, even the Southern Christian Leadership Council and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, as well as the entire black liberation movement, would have benefited from a more communal style of leadership. She argued that the patriarchal leadership model of the black church was imposed on the black liberation movement, to the movement’s detriment. But the weaknesses of Leninist parties were also amply demonstrated over the second half of

84 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 204.

85 Fred Hampton, “You Can Murder a Liberator, but You Can’t Murder Liberation,” in *Black Panthers Speak*, 142.

86 Kalyvas, “Hegemonic Sovereignty,” 358; cf. Dawson, *Blacks in and out of the Left*.

the twentieth century. Emancipatory movements must *organizationally* as well as politically reflect the goals of the movement. The idea of a Black Prince is no longer useful. While strong leadership from both black women and black men continues to be needed, the leadership model that African American leaders today should embrace needs to reflect the goals of true economic, social, gender, and racial equality, and participatory democracy as well as black liberation. Indeed, we can learn from Machiavelli that political analysis and political theory should be based on a realistic assessment of both social reality and human nature. We can also learn from Garvey that a successful movement for black liberation must take the aspirations of the black grassroots to heart. But from Hannah Arendt we can learn the importance of the distinction between ruling and leading.<sup>87</sup>

Arendt, drawing from classical conceptions of heroic leadership, notes that to act politically necessitates being courageous. One must be courageous enough to speak *in public*. Specifically, “the connotation of courage which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one’s self into the world and begin a story of one’s own.”<sup>88</sup> Leadership especially entails having the courage to publicly step up and, as has been the practice in the black liberation movement for over a century and a half, speak truth to power.

But, Arendt warns, we should not automatically equate leading and ruling: “[The] ruler is alone, isolated against others by his force, just as the beginner was isolated through his initiative at the state, before he had found others to join him. Yet the strength of the beginner and leader shows itself only in his initiative and the risk he takes, not in the actual achievement. In the case of the successful ruler, he may claim for himself what actually is the achievement of many.”<sup>89</sup> Garvey, in fact, can be said to have claimed for himself “what actually [was] the achievement of many.” More problematically, it is clear from his thought that he believed a split between those who give the orders and those who execute was the proper division of labor. An analysis of black history shows multiple problems with this view, including the straightforward insights that it is easy to decapitate a movement that is dependent on a single personality and that investing one’s hopes in a single leader also leaves the movement vulnerable to that person’s weaknesses. Particularly with respect to the former problem, Malcolm X’s failure, and to a lesser degree that of King, was ultimately the same as Garvey’s.

In this context the problem with the modern prince is only slightly subtler. Vanguard parties, as we saw in an earlier quote from Gramsci, believe in enforcing a division between those who rule and issue the orders and everyone else.

87 I thank my colleagues Patchen Markell and Robert Gooding-Williams for pushing me to wrestle with this distinction. Patchen in particular suggested this direction might provide a fruitful line of analysis.

88 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (orig. 1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 186.

89 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 189–90.

The democracy in “democratic centralism” is extremely limited. The vanguard is highly susceptible, as are all rulers, to becoming isolated. This isolation nearly inevitably leaves the modern prince, the Marxist-Leninist party, to become, in Gramsci’s words, “vanguards without armies of their own.” This was certainly the case with the black Leninists I describe in *Blacks in and out of the Left* during the two key twentieth-century periods of black radical insurgency, with the ultimate result being failure. When a Marxist-Leninist party achieves power, its isolation is even more likely to lead to autocracy and corruption.

In some ways Garvey’s conception of his role reminds one of Arendt’s description of one of Plato’s rulers: “[Ruling] would demand a quasi-divine quality in the ruler of men to distinguish him as sharply from his subjects as the slaves are distinguished from the master or the sheep from the shepherd.”<sup>90</sup> If we go back to Machiavelli, however, we’re reminded that humans are not divine but often sinful. Any mode of leadership that depends on the semi-divine nature of an individual (or even a relatively small group like a vanguard political party) would seem doomed to failure—if we have as the ultimate criterion for success bringing about a society within which all can flourish. A democratically based leadership would be an alternative mode of leadership that does not rely on the semi-divine nature of an individual or relatively small group or party. It relies instead on democratic debate and discourse to reach relatively sound judgments.

Patchen Markell makes the telling point that “from an Arendtian perspective, however, the most fundamental threat to democratic political activity lies in the loss of responsiveness to events: the erosion of the contexts in which action makes sense. . . . These are signs of the contraction of the dimension of activity that concerns Arendt; and they become particularly significant for democracy when they systematically characterize the experience of either citizens generally or of a subset of citizens disproportionately.”<sup>91</sup> One of the key aspects of politics in a neo-liberal era is precisely the material and psychological disempowering of citizens who come to feel unable, or at least extremely limited in their ability, to effectively respond politically to even the most traumatic of events.<sup>92</sup> This disempowering has characterized much of black politics, as demonstrated by the weak black response to the political disaster that followed the Katrina disaster—at least until the highly publicized murders of blacks by the state and nonblack vigilantes between 2012 and 2014 that resulted in the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>93</sup>

To build black political movements that are responsive and that can demand responses, it will be necessary to transform black politics once again into what

90 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 227.

91 Patchen Markell, “The Rule of the People: Arendt, Arche, and Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 100 (2006):12–13.

92 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Dawson and Francis, “Black Politics and the Neoliberal Racial Order.”

93 Michael Dawson, *Not in Our Lifetime: The Future of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Dawson and Francis, “Black Politics and the Neoliberal Racial Order.”

Peter Hallward calls a politics of “prescription.” For Hallward an antiracist politics demands that we “make an anti-racist prescription *consequential* in a situation that long since accommodated itself to the explicit principle of equality. To uphold this prescription is to participate in the step-by-step transformation of what Nikhil Singh has recently described as the ramified ‘spatial apartheid’ of a structurally racist socioeconomic order.”<sup>94</sup> The same would be true of a new politics of black liberation—a politics that would no longer accommodate itself within a neoliberal racial order that provides real benefits (if very fragilely) to a few but consigns the great majority of people of color within the US and worldwide to the global social, economic, and political margins. A politics of prescription would necessitate that once again we free ourselves to make our own history. Hallward continues, “Prescription serves to *crystallize* hitherto inconsequential aspects of a subject in a newly consequential form,” or reinvolve what has always been consequential in forms that make sense for a new era.<sup>95</sup> Black political leadership must help guide the self-constitution of varied black communities into *political* communities capable not only of self-definition and the exercise of self-determination but of launching and leading an overall movement capable of real transformation. As Slavoj Žižek urges, we cannot any longer settle for a politics that is “tolerated and supported as long they do not get too close to a certain limit.”<sup>96</sup> Hallward says we need once again a politics of “*shall* rather than *ought*.”<sup>97</sup>

A politics of “shall” will be far edgier than black politics has normally been in the past several decades. Such a politics will demand creative leadership willing to think outside the boundaries of the ordinary. When thinking about politics, not just leadership, we should take one of Arendt’s points to heart: politically our “foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence of everyday life.”<sup>98</sup> This is not just the task of leadership but of all of us, whatever the mode of leadership we collectively decide is most appropriate for facing the harsh challenges that confront us.

Such a politics will have to be organized. Whatever the form of organization that black political movements embrace going forward, they will confront a situation markedly different from that faced by radical activists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The current neoliberal racial order provides complex challenges that were never faced by previous generations’ black activists. This is not just a problem that confronts activists within the US, as Alain Badiou and many others attest. Badiou describes the terrain: “In the nineteenth century, the problem was the arrival of the new proletarian masses on the political scene; in

94 Peter Hallward, “The Politics of Prescription,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104, no. 4 (2005): 773 (emphasis in original).

95 Hallward, “Politics of Prescription,” 782 (emphasis in original).

96 Slavoj Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin’s Choice,” in *Revolution at the Gates: Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2002), 170.

97 Hallward, “Politics of Prescription,” 783 (emphasis in original).

98 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 197.

the twentieth century, it was the political emancipation of colonized people. . . . [Today] the masses we speak of are profoundly atomized by capitalism. . . . These masses are not organized according to traditional categories of class, and so for the moment they are more or less entirely abandoned to the nihilism of capitalism.”<sup>99</sup> They are also no longer organized, as David Scott points out in *Conscripts of Modernity*, according to the logic of anticolonial struggle, or by implication the logics of twentieth-century black liberation struggles, whether in the US or elsewhere. Yet instead of succumbing to what Scott calls the tragic character of the current moment, it is the task of leadership to articulate and refine the desire for transformative emancipation—an emancipation that must this time around be centered not only in transforming the openly oppressive legal chains of the racial state but also in transforming the economy and civil society in ways that allow all to have the best opportunity to flourish.

A key problem that confronted black activists and others throughout the twentieth century and has not yet been solved is how to provide leadership that is both democratic and organized enough to overcome the still dominating and rapacious forces of white supremacy and a capitalist order out of control. Despite its resurgent popularity in academic and some activist circles, anarchy is not the answer. Black movements have consistently rejected anarchy for good reason over the decades. Democracy, indeed politics, by nature is *unruly*, and this unruliness according to Arendt and her followers is to be embraced, not tamed in the way that political philosophers from Plato to Machiavelli have attempted in theory, and often in practice as well. Yet it is also true that movements need to be sustained to effect lasting change, and no movement for racial justice or its leadership has effected such change without being organized. Markell himself asks the vexing question “But how can the multitude organize itself and still maintain its distinctively horizontal, anti-hierarchical character?”<sup>100</sup> This is an especially critical question in the face of the savage repression that political movements face, even increasingly in putatively democratic polities, when they try to assert their democratic rights to be political. This is a question that has yet to be satisfactorily answered in theory or practice.

Where in the black experience can we find a model of black leadership that might have a chance of competing with the charismatic prince that is so deeply embedded in black political culture?<sup>101</sup> If we turn to the community politics of

99 Alain Badiou, “‘We Need a Popular Discipline’: Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative,” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008): 656–57.

100 Patchen Markell, “The Moment Has Passed: Power after Arendt,” in *Radical Future Pasts: Untimely Political Theory*, ed. Romand Coles, Mark Reinhardt, and George Schulman (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 133.

101 For discussions of black leadership and black culture, see Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), for an Afrocentric discussion of black leadership. Charles Henry, *Culture and African American Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), discusses black leadership in the context of African American culture and civil religion. Several African American women



black reconstruction, we find a model of black communalism in which black men and women participated collectively and relatively democratically in leadership.<sup>102</sup> Both Garvey and Machiavelli argued that a prince was needed to transform an oppressed people if they were to obtain their security and perhaps their liberty. But the profound transformation that people must undergo to become free is *harder* for people if they overrely on a “prince” to free them. To move forward we must have goals commensurate with our best aspirations. Althusser was absolutely correct when he called us “*to aim at a much higher point . . . to aim beyond what exists*, so as to attain a goal *that does not exist* but must exist—to aim above all existing principalities, beyond their *limits*.”<sup>103</sup> In *Blacks in and out of the Left* I advocate the concept of pragmatic utopianism that emerges out of black political thought and practice. The pragmatic element is the Machiavellian notion of taking the world as it is. The utopian aspect is just as important, however. If we are not to lose our way in the often bitter struggle for freedom from domination, oppression, and exploitation, we must *always* have firmly in mind the society for which we aim. We must not only “aim at a much higher point . . . beyond what exists,” but also organize and build a leadership consistent with that goal, even if it does not yet exist. For our times this exhortation entails us to abandon the seductive but exceedingly dangerous fantasy of salvation through reliance on a “prince”—whether of the Renaissance or modern variety. It is up to us, all of us, to struggle through the hard times and collectively provide leadership for the multiple movements needed to finally build a just society free from oppression, domination, and exploitation.

The rejection of both the Prince and the Modern Prince is not, like the Occupy movement of the early 2010s, a rejection of organization per se. As I observed earlier, our enemies are organized, and organization is needed to counter the forces of domination, oppression, and unjust inequality. Ultimately, Arendt’s observation “that what organization does is simply maintain people in relation of proximity to each other, and to orient their attention, so that they don’t altogether ‘disperse,’ as she puts it, as soon as the ‘fleeting moment of action’ is over.” is theoretically unsatisfactory and historically inaccurate.<sup>104</sup> Effective movements for social change last longer than a “fleeting moment” and do considerably more than keep people in proximity to each other. While it is understandable, given the

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have criticized the patriarchal structure of black leadership. See Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End, 1984); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin-Hayman, 1990), for examples.

<sup>102</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, “To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women’s Political History,” in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837–1960*, ed. Ann Gordon, Bettye Collier-Thomas, John H. Bracey, Arlene Avakian, and Joyce Berkman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 66–99.

<sup>103</sup> Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 73 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>104</sup> Markell, “Moment Has Passed,” 113–44.

crimes that many powerful, longer-lasting organizations have committed, to wish for minimalist organizations that exist in the moment to effect democratic change, in American history examples of such that were effective are essentially nonexistent. Lauren Berlant, following Giorgio Agamben, considers the feasibility of a politics that focuses on “means without end, where the pure mediality of being in the present of the political and the sensual is what matters and not any ends or preconditions.”<sup>105</sup> But the oppressed cannot afford to be solely concerned with process. The stuff of democratic *movements* is made up of concern for both democratic processes (which the Leninist organizations trampled) and democratic ends (which those with anarchist impulses are in danger of losing sight of). As before, we can look to the black radical movements for examples of organizations giving us hope for the possibilities of building long-term organized movements as well as examples that give us reason to be uneasy—often the same organizations give reason for hope and concern.

Historian Barbara Ransby cogently makes a vital case for principled leadership and organization:

The notion of a movement without either structure or leaders obscures and privileges in corrosive ways. In a leaderless movement anyone can name, negotiate, convene and demand while simultaneously eschewing the label and responsibilities of leadership. At the end of the day these people are beholden to no one. In order for activists to craft specific goals and demands wedded to a solid justice agenda built on the needs and aspirations of the most oppressed sectors of our communities, leadership, accountability and organization are necessary ingredients.<sup>106</sup>

Ransby calls, as she often has, for a “group-centered” leadership that neither falls into the trap of waiting for the next King-like “messianic charismatic leader,” the next “black prince,” nor falls prey to the anarchist delusions of a “leaderless” movement. Ransby insists, correctly and forcibly, that “we need leaders of the Ella Baker variety.”<sup>107</sup>

We must ensure that our movement’s leadership is built on principles, principles that are reflected in the leadership of the black liberation movement, that are worth the enormous sacrifices African Americans have willingly endured over the centuries in order to gain their freedom.

<sup>105</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 260.

<sup>106</sup> Barbara Ransby, “Ella Taught Me: Shattering the Myth of the Leaderless Movement,” *Color Lines*, 2015, <http://www.colorlines.com/articles/ella-taught-me-shattering-myth-leaderless-movement>.

<sup>107</sup> Ransby, “Ella Taught Me.”

## 12: A. Philip Randolph

### Radicalizing Rights at the Intersection of Class and Race

Michael McCann

#### Introduction

“We are gathered here for the longest demonstration in the history of this nation. . . . We are the advance guard of a massive moral revolution for jobs and freedom,” announced the seventy-four-year-old A. Philip Randolph to a crowd of over a quarter of a million people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom over fifty years ago.<sup>1</sup> While most people identify the 1963 march primarily with Martin Luther King’s inspiring “I Have a Dream” speech, it was Randolph, the architect and official director of the march, who spoke first. This is fitting, because it was Randolph who had constructed the template for the event over twenty years earlier, when he threatened a mass protest against racial discrimination in the defense industries and federal government, only to call it off once President Roosevelt issued executive order 8802 barring federal government discrimination and creating the Fair Employment Practices Committee. Moreover, the 1963 event’s commitment to “jobs and freedom” reflected directly Randolph’s lifelong work insisting that economic justice must be the foundation for the fulfillment of civil rights equally available to all persons. “No individual did more to help the poor, the dispossessed and the working class around the world,” proclaimed Bayard Rustin in memorializing Randolph after the latter’s death in 1979.<sup>2</sup>

A. Philip Randolph is remembered for his achievements as a labor leader and civil rights strategist more than as a political theorist. This is in large part because his political vision and guiding principles evolved directly in tandem with his changing modes of praxis. Indeed, commentators often portray Randolph as an elusively pragmatic activist who later in life abandoned some of the commitments that had been most fundamental to him as a young man. He evolved from the radical propagandist whom Woodrow Wilson once labeled as “the most dangerous man in America”<sup>3</sup> to the “Gentle Warrior” who courted American presi-

1 A. Philip Randolph, “Address at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” August 28, 1963, <https://www.jacksonville.com/article/20130820/NEWS/801247969>.

2 Ronda Racha Penrice, “Remembering the Legacy of A. Philip Randolph on Labor Day,” *Grio*, September 2, 2013, <http://thegrio.com/2013/09/02/remembering-the-legacy-of-a-phillip-randolph-on-labor-day/>.

3 Cited from Associated Press, “A. Philip Randolph Is Dead; Pioneer in Rights and Labor,” May 17, 1979. Randolph was often labeled as dangerous. Congressman Arthur Miller of Nebraska had called Randolph “the most dangerous Negro in America”; so did the US attorney general in

dents, from the “Lenin of Harlem” in his early years to an outspoken anticommunist, and from a “class first” socialist strategist urging interracial worker alliance to “Mr. Black Labor” who led the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.<sup>4</sup> And it is true that over time Randolph softened his rhetoric, reversed his views of various alliances and enemies at home as well as abroad, shifted strategic positions and recalibrated expectations repeatedly, and increasingly displayed an aptitude for negotiation with powerful labor, corporate, and government officials whom he had once vilified.

This essay advances an argument, however, that the core themes and principles of the larger political vision that animated Randolph remained remarkably consistent throughout his life. It is especially important that Randolph never relinquished his commitment to socialism as a standard for critically assessing the harsh exploitation and chaos wrought by American racial capitalism and as the ultimate long-term goal of radical democratic activism. By his own definition, he remained a “radical” all of his life. As we shall see, radical praxis for Randolph was marked by persistent criticism of the status quo and consistent commitment to substantial egalitarian social, economic, and political change, but also by a willingness to adapt tactical maneuvers to ever-changing conditions and context.<sup>5</sup> He was above all a *political* theorist and actor.

Randolph’s short speech to the assembled crowd in 1963 gave voice to each of the core principles that defined his career as a visionary activist. I will demonstrate this by starting each of this chapter’s thematic sections outlining his larger vision by citing lines from the 1963 speech, which came late in his career. My discussion begins with Randolph’s enduring vision of the good life in an imagined socialist America and then shifts toward the key elements of critical analysis and rhetoric through which Randolph advanced his strategic political praxis.<sup>6</sup> An important anchor of this discussion will be Randolph’s critical engagement with *law*. Randolph was extremely wary of the legal system he saw around him and its potential for advancing social justice. The American constitutional inheritance, Randolph charged at various moments, was at once profoundly hypocritical and marked by fundamental contradictions. Randolph often endorsed the promise of equal rights for all under the law, but he consistently insisted that legal equality must include positive socioeconomic rights, thus anticipating and paralleling current

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1919, and later J. Edgar Hoover. It is interesting in this regard that he was not targeted in the McCarthy era; he may have been too powerful, too sympathetic, and too visible.

4 Lee Sustar, “From Harlem Lenin to AFC Bureaucrat,” *Socialist Worker*, May/June 1986.

5 Randolph’s own views on radicalism will be noted in subsequent pages. On the enduring radicalism of Randolph’s legacy, see William P. Jones, “The Forgotten Radical History of the March on Washington,” *Dissent*, Spring 2013, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-forgotten-radical-history-of-the-march-on-washington>.

6 Praxis is the process by which theory, ideas, or vision is enacted, embodied, or realized. In my usage, *praxis* refers to the act of practicing and realizing ideas in action, which means critically testing and adapting ideas in different material conditions. See Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 1845–47 (New York: International, 1976), 3–5; and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1972).

international human rights discourse. Thus Randolph's radical commitment to economic justice and democratic participation by ordinary people distinguished his intellectual and organizational contributions from those of other twentieth-century civil rights activists, especially most of the liberal lawyers identified with the NAACP. Randolph rarely critiqued in direct terms the legalistic propensities of the mainstream civil rights movement, but his life's work and core principles displayed a bold contrast in orientation, although one that became arguably more complementary and collaborative over time.

The focus on Randolph's critical engagement with law, I argue, enables us to understand more clearly both the normative and the strategic tensions between his early "class first" and eventual "race first" approach to addressing the exploitation of black working people. The shift came early in his career and followed directly from his practical political activity fighting to integrate American labor unions and to advocate for the black Pullman porters, who faced racism from corporate managers and white workers alike. But while Randolph focused increasingly on combating racial inequality, he always insisted that racial justice required economic justice and fundamental changes in American industrial relations as well as political institutions and social practices. Randolph's ever-shifting strategic gambits were responses to changing historical contexts, but his perennial struggles to advance justice at the intersections of class and race hierarchy remain relevant today, in our purportedly postracial and postclass neoliberal era marked by the greatest economic inequality in world history.<sup>7</sup>

Any effort to construct core theoretical principles and themes advocated by an activist like Randolph must grapple with the difficulty of identifying core original texts where his developing ideas were expressed. Randolph did not write any books, seemed to have little patience for abstract philosophy, and wrote essays and speeches that rarely exceeded five pages in length. My approach is to focus primarily on his inflammatory articles and editorial snippets in the *Messenger* from the early period (1917–26) and to trace only selectively the key themes as they developed through his public speeches from the 1930s through the 1960s. Again, while noting important changes in his thinking about key themes, especially regarding the intersection of class and race, I will emphasize continuity in the overall analytical and normative vision that grew out of his political activity over the course of his life.

### Randolph's Vision of the Just Social Order

The goal of our civil rights revolution is [not] merely the passage of civil rights legislation. . . . We want a free, democratic society dedicated to the political, economic and social advancement of man. . . . It falls to us to demand new forms of social

7 See Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014).

planning, to create full employment, and to put automation at the service of human needs, not at the service of profits—for we are the worst victims of unemployment. Negroes are at the forefront of today's movement for social and racial justice, because we know we cannot expect the realization of our aspirations through the same old anti-democratic social institutions and philosophies that all along have frustrated our aspirations.<sup>8</sup>

Randolph's political vision grew from many different influences. Asa Philip Randolph was born, in 1889, and raised in Crescent City, Florida, not far from Jacksonville. His father, Reverend James Randolph, and his mother, Elizabeth Randolph, each left a deep imprint on young Asa. They, along with other figures in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, exemplified racial pride, sensitivity to the plight of African Americans, and a spirited commitment to self-defense against violent threats, especially those posed by hostile whites. Biographer/analyst Cornelius Bynum underlines that young Asa seemed to identify far more with the egalitarian, generous spirit of the "social gospel" than with meditative spirituality grounded in Christian theology.<sup>9</sup>

Randolph transitioned into a young radical political activist after he followed many other southern African Americans to Harlem in 1911.<sup>10</sup> He took on a variety of menial jobs and studied sociology and literature at City College. Randolph began "reading Marx as children read *Alice in Wonderland*." It was "like finally running into an idea which gives you your outlook on life."<sup>11</sup> He mingled with black intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson as well as the socialists Eugene Debs and Hubert Harrison, who led him to recognize the class dimensions of racial inequality and to join the American Socialist Party. Randolph, who followed Du Bois's example and took the name A. Philip, also met Columbia law student Chandler Owen, with whom he set up an employment agency called the Brotherhood of Labor, worked somewhat futilely to unionize black workers, and started to edit and write for the radical Negro monthly the *Messenger*. Founded in 1917, by 1919 the *Messenger* had generated a monthly circulation of around

<sup>8</sup> Randolph, March on Washington speech, 1963.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> The context of black migration to the North is important to understanding Randolph's commitments. Between 1910 and 1920 the number of black persons employed in industry nearly doubled, to over 900,000. While one third of African American workers were employed in industry by 1920, most labored in the lowest-paying and most physically taxing jobs. See Manning Marable, "A. Philip Randolph and the Foundations of Black American Socialism," in *A "Radical America" Reader*, ed. James Green (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 209–233; Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619–1973* (New York: Praeger, 1974).

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Elliott, "Hero of the Democratic Left: A. Phillip Randolph," *Democratic Socialists of America*, April 14, 2013, [http://www.dsusa.org/hero\\_of\\_the\\_democratic\\_left\\_a\\_philip\\_randolph/](http://www.dsusa.org/hero_of_the_democratic_left_a_philip_randolph/). See Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 32, 50–52.

150,000.<sup>12</sup> Finally, Randolph met his future wife, Lucille Green, who owned a beauty salon and helped to support—financially, socially, and organizationally—Randolph's expanding ventures as a political activist.

It is important to understand Randolph's theorizing in terms of his particular positioning among advocates in the "New Negro" movement. The New Negro movement, which flourished in the dynamic, relatively open context of the turn-of-the-century Harlem Renaissance, expressed an attitude or sensibility as much as new ideas. In contrast to the Old Crowd of Negro leaders who "meant well" but suffered from "ignorance" and timidity, "the New Crowd must be composed of young men who are educated, radical, and fearless. . . . [It] is uncompromising. Its tactics are not defensive but offensive." The New Crowd activists who migrated north were impatient, impetuous, and driven by a deep yearning to take control of their destiny. "The New Crowd would have no . . . peace until the Negro receives his complete social, economic and political justice." Indeed, the words *control*, *self-determination*, *destiny*, and *progress* were used repeatedly in writings by the bold young Randolph and others in the movement. One key distinction between the "new" leaders and the "Old Crowd" was that the former generally took issue with the idea, advocated by white liberals and endorsed by Du Bois, that progressive change depended on leadership by the "talented tenth" of blacks and appeals primarily directed toward white elites. The New Crowd instead appealed directly to working-class and petite bourgeois entrepreneurial blacks (like Lucille Green) and whites, often characterized as "ordinary people." The New Negro Crowd "would not appeal to white leaders. It would appeal to the plain working people everywhere."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Randolph, like many in the cohort, embraced and advocated openly the ideals of socialism and pinned the prospects for worker empowerment on joining the Socialist Party. The goal was "to build a new society—a society of equals, without class, race, caste, or religious distinctions"<sup>14</sup> And finally, the new generation of self-identified Negro radicals was highly internationalist in its gaze. They viewed the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of communism as inspiration and reason for hope that Negroes could become part of a progressive working-class transformation in the United States. The changing context of foreign national and international relations continued to influence the evolving shifts in Randolph's thinking throughout his life.

Randolph's vision of the good society built on the foundations of the New Negro movement, but he developed his own theoretical positions that often challenged other New Negro leaders as well as the Old Crowd.<sup>15</sup> For one thing,

12 George Robertson, "'Speak Out Now When Others Grow Silent': The *Messenger*, the IWW and Debates over New Negro Radicalism," Harry Bridges Center for Labor Research, University of Washington, [http://depts.washington.edu/pcls/documents/research/Robertson\\_SpeakOut.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/pcls/documents/research/Robertson_SpeakOut.pdf).

13 A. Philip Randolph, "A New Crowd—A New Negro," *Messenger*, May-June 1919.

14 A. Philip Randolph, "The New Negro—What Is He?" *Messenger* 2, August 1920, 73-74.

15 Probably the best single statement by Randolph about the institutional and policy agenda for radical change and promotion of the good life in the United States is "The Negro and the New Social Order," *Messenger*, March 1919.

he was more inclined to proclaim the virtues of a systematic “scientific” approach. This included faith in “the science of government and economics, scientific history and sociology” as essential to understanding how social institutions work and how they can be changed for the better. Indeed the *Messenger* boasted that it was “the only magazine of scientific radicalism in the world, published by Negroes.” Randolph’s frequent invocations of “scientific materialism” in particular conveyed that his political theory was more deeply grounded in Marxism and socialist theory than was that of many others. Throughout his life Randolph insisted that material conditions, and specifically the class-based organization of production, were the crucial foundation of social and political organization. “For social, like organic, progress, in the main, responds to material imperatives.”<sup>16</sup>

Frequently, though, the moral posture of the social gospel that attracted him when young and scientific materialism were fused into a complex mix. For example, Randolph at times proclaimed the core religious principle that all “the children of God are equal before Him” and divisions among people thus are “artificial,” underlining a belief in the natural bond among humans.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, he argued that capitalist exchange relations generated subjects who were driven by unfettered self-interest, greed, and ambition, thus dividing both individuals and groups, and especially classes, into perpetual conflict.<sup>18</sup> “The inordinate lust for power, overwhelming ambition to rule, the intent to secure an advantage, impels individuals and social groups to adopt the philosophy of force, the policy of fraud, or the method of education, whichever policy is available, is and is recognized as likely to secure the most permanent results.”<sup>19</sup> In general, scientific materialism guided his approach to reading historical institutional conditions and social forces as well as charting strategic paths to pursuit of core ideals.

The key source and site of social conflict was the private ownership of the means of production and the fruits of labor. Vaguely invoking the Marxian theory of surplus value, Randolph explained: “Primarily wealth is the result of the combination of labor, land, capital and management. . . . Capital is based on performed labor,” but the capitalist class denies workers meaningful return for the capital they produce. “Capitalism is a system under which a small class of private individuals makes profits out of the labor of the masses by virtue of their owner-

16 A. Phillip Randolph, “The State of the Race,” *Messenger*, April 1923, 60–62.

17 Cornelius Bynum, “A. Philip Randolph, the *Messenger*, and the Women’s Movement during World War I,” paper presented at the 95th Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Raleigh Convention Center, Raleigh, NC, January 6, 2014, [http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p435182\\_index.html](http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p435182_index.html).

18 It is not clear whether Randolph thought that self-interest or self-preservation was “natural” or primarily a product of capitalism. For example, we shall see in coming pages that he thought of “self-defense” as natural. But overall, he seemed to lean toward a sort of Marxist materialism that blamed capitalism for excessive greed and conflict, while socialism would be both a product and producer of greater solidarity and community.

19 A. Philip Randolph, “The Negro in Politics,” *Messenger*, 1918.



ship of the machinery and course of production and exchange.”<sup>20</sup> The result was that Negro workers were little better off in the wage system of capitalism than as slaves. “As chattel slaves we were the property of our masters. . . . Today, as wage earners. . . . the worker is but a machine for making profits.”<sup>21</sup> And the exploitation of workers who are denied the “full fruit of their toil” is the foundation for the class division in American society. “In human relationship this means that one section of the population appropriates a part of the product which others have produced without giving any equivalent in exchange. Scientifically speaking, it is a technical defect in our economy, which leads to breakdowns, periodically,” and ensures “disastrous economic crises with millions unemployed . . . mass poverty and the dole.”<sup>22</sup> The young Randolph thus tended to subsume issues of racial exploitation, inequality, and even discrimination by whites under the broader dynamics of class exploitation. “There is no race problem . . . there is only a class problem,” because “the economic interests of all workers, be they white, black, brown or yellow, are identical.”<sup>23</sup> As Manning Marable pointed out in a classic critical essay, “race and ethnicity played no role in the ‘scientific evolution’ of class contradictions” for Randolph. “Class was an economic category without cultural or social forms.”<sup>24</sup> In this regard, Randolph’s formal theorization rejected, or at least minimized, attention to the historical interdependence of and mutually constitutive relationship between capitalism and racial hierarchy underlined by most contemporary theorists of “racial capitalism.”<sup>25</sup> Not only did this theoretical commitment seem to later generations of black radicals a “crude and historically false over simplification,” but it contrasted markedly with Randolph’s political activism, which increasingly was race-based and focused on mobilizing black workers.<sup>26</sup>

As Randolph saw it, advancing progress toward the good life required dramatic increases in the relative collective control and self-determination of Negro workers in all spheres of life. Economic democracy and justice must be the foundation of progress, however. In the long run, the goal must be the replacement of capitalism with democratic socialism. “We must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, ‘Abolition of the wage system.’” As a young radical exhorting black workers to join the IWW, he proclaimed, “It is the historic mission

20 A. Philip Randolph, “Address at Union United Church,” November 1, 1942; Randolph, “Lynching: Capitalism Its Cause, Socialism Its Cure,” *Messenger*, March 1919.

21 A. Philip Randolph, “Negro Workers: The A.F.L. or I.W.W.,” *Messenger*, July 1919, 14–15.

22 A. Philip Randolph, “Statement to Educational Political Conference in Chicago, Illinois, at the International House,” n.d., accessed March 20, 2014, [http://www1.assumption.edu/users/mcclymer/NewNegro/Randolph%20Statement%20to%20Educational%20Political%20Conference\[1\].pdf](http://www1.assumption.edu/users/mcclymer/NewNegro/Randolph%20Statement%20to%20Educational%20Political%20Conference[1].pdf).

23 Randolph, “A Class, Not Race Problem,” *Industrial Worker*, February 3, 1917, 3.

24 Marable, “A. Philip Randolph and the Foundations of Black American Socialism,” 215.

25 See Robin D. G. Kelley, “What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?” *Boston Review*, January 12, 2017, <http://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-what-did-cedric-robinson-mean-racial-capitalism>; Jodi Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” *Journal of the Critical Ethnic Studies Association* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76–85.

26 Manning Marable, *From the Grassroots* (Boston: South End, 1980). 83.

of the working class to do away with capitalism.”<sup>27</sup> But even the young Randolph knew that achieving such a radical transformation was far off, and that the immediate goal was to increase relative democratic worker control directly within capitalist workplaces through collective union involvement. Workers must settle in the short term for a more “conservative motto, ‘A fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work.’”<sup>28</sup> In his 1942 address at Union United Church, the union president declared that organized “labor has a choice and moral right to its share of work and produces a resulting value co-ordinating” the relationship among work, products, capital, and management.<sup>29</sup> And by organizing, industrial and agrarian workers are “forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.”<sup>30</sup> Randolph initially embraced the multiracial “One Big Union” promise of the IWW, but starting in the mid-1920s he reconciled himself to the necessity of organizing segregated all-Negro unions that could address the twin forces of class and race domination together.<sup>31</sup>

Randolph was no less committed to increasing political equality and democratic access to state power for workers of all races, and increasingly during his life specifically for Negro workers and the middle class. In an epistolary-style article in the *Messenger*<sup>32</sup> Randolph (and coeditor Chandler Owen) took up the concept that state officials who govern must be bound to the consent of the governed and thus expanded the general theme of worker control to the broader political sphere. This would require a wide range of changes in laws and institutions “that we have now”—regarding voting, union organization, free speech and assembly, coordinated economic planning, and more—so as to facilitate increased political power for workers of all races.<sup>33</sup> “The people want something more than the dispersal of equality and power among individual citizens in a liberal, political democratic system. They demand with striking comparability the dispersal of equality and power among the citizen-workers in an economic-democracy.”<sup>34</sup> Randolph was insistent that this required above all development of a robust socialist party<sup>35</sup> but also other organizations such as consumer cooperatives, civil liberties advo-

27 Randolph, “Negro Workers: The A.F.L. or I.W.W.”

28 Randolph, “Negro Workers: The A.F.L. or I.W.W.”

29 Randolph, “Address at Union United Church,” November 1, 1942.

30 Randolph, “Negro Workers: The A.F.L. or I.W.W.”; Randolph, “The Negro Radicalism,” *Messenger*, October 2, 1919.

31 Randolph, “Our Reason for Being,” *Messenger*, August 1919, 11–12.

32 A. Philip Randolph, “People’s Council Invites Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph to Present Problem of Negroes at Convention,” *Messenger*, November 1917.

33 Randolph’s commitment to political rights—to vote, free speech, and assembly—grew over his lifetime, especially as he focused more on racial oppression than on class, increased his criticism of communism and totalitarian systems, and moderated his commitment to socialism as social democratic reform. Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 196–97.

34 A. Philip Randolph, “Why Should We March?,” 1942.

35 “The Negroes—99% of them—are working people. They have nothing in common with big business and their employers. They ought to belong to the workers’ party. And that is the Socialist Party.” A. Philip Randolph, “Negroes Organizing in Socialist Party,” *Messenger*, July 1918.

cates, and, of course, black-led civil rights groups like the NACCP. The result of democratization would be greater voice in all dimensions of government policy making, including material redistribution through better wages and affirmative government support systems.

While Randolph focused on empowerment of people as producers or workers, he also was committed to increasing their power as consumers to fulfill basic material needs and the social foundations of citizenship. Raising the living standards of all people and reducing inequality of consumption capacity as well as political power was essential to the good life shared by rights-bearing citizens. The fight for economic democracy thus must, and would, “make certain the assurance of the good life—the more abundant life.”<sup>36</sup> This meant that better pay would enable more free time for self-development outside of work. The editors of the *Messenger* made clear that they were not interested in Negroes’ getting more work. “Negroes have too much work already. What we want Negroes to get is less work and more wages, with more leisure for study and recreation.”<sup>37</sup> The 1966 “Freedom Budget” prepared by the APR Institute offered a list of specific policy goals that a more democratic government would ensure: abolition of poverty, guaranteed full employment, full production and economic growth, adequate minimum wages, farm income parity, guaranteed incomes for all people unable to work, a decent home for every American family, modern health services for all, full educational opportunity for every person, enhanced social security and welfare programs, and equitable taxation and monetary policies.<sup>38</sup>

Along with a “socialized economy” and “democratic government,” Randolph tirelessly advocated for a “democratized society.”<sup>39</sup> “We favor ‘social equality’ in every sense of the phrase.”<sup>40</sup> Like other New Negroes, Randolph yearned for and demanded greater respect for Negroes generally, and for Negro workers in particular, in all spheres of social and cultural life—education, transportation, marriage, housing, consumption, access to financial loans, and the like. In this regard Randolph was a dogged advocate of racial and class *integration*. As he saw it, segregation is always a product and producer of unequal power relations. “Segregation never originates in the interest of the segregated, but in the interest of the segregator.” To be segregated inherently connotes and reinforces *inferiority*, he insisted. “Let us note how segregation functions. In our social life, the crimi-

36 A. Philip Randolph, “Call to March on Washington,” 1941.

37 A. Philip Randolph, “Our Reason for Being.” This demand clearly echoed the slogan of the Eight-Hour Day Movement in the 1880s: “Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest and eight hours for what you will.” That movement was led by white trade unions, and Randolph fought to extend it to Negroes, women, everyone.

38 It is relevant that this policy agenda is not far different from the “reconstruction” agenda published by Randolph and Owen: “The Negro and the New Social Order,” *Messenger*, March 1919.

39 Randolph, “Statement to Educational Political Conference in Chicago,” n.d.

40 A. Philip Randolph, “The Negro and the New Social Order.”

nal is segregated, not the law-abiding citizens; the insane, not the sane; the diseased, not the healthy." The entire "history of segregation" has expressed "the idea of people of social position, culture, wealth, power and refinement, setting aside their alleged inferiors as outcasts, pariahs," Randolph wrote in 1926.<sup>41</sup> This commitment to racial integration was perhaps the most important basis for the young Randolph's increasingly strident attacks on Marcus Garvey and his nationalist dreams of return to Africa,<sup>42</sup> which in turn led a later generation of black nationalists to characterize Randolph as a moderate liberal desegregationist. But it is important to recognize that Randolph's commitment did not just express a moral aspiration for black self-respect and respect from others; the commitment to integration reflected his understanding of organizational power. The commitment was no moral abstraction but a matter of "mutual interest." If worker collaboration and solidarity were critical for challenging the capitalist class and its political lackeys so as to improve wages, work conditions, and worker leverage, then Negroes must unite with white workers in integrated workplaces, unions like the IWW, and the Socialist Party.<sup>43</sup> And this integration in the economic and political spheres would both produce and be a product of racial integration in all sectors of social life.<sup>44</sup>

Economic, political, and social equality for women, especially as workers, figured prominently in Randolph's political vision. The *Messenger* regularly included articles about women's work and political engagements. A special issue on "the New Negro Woman" proclaimed that "like her white sister," the New Negro Woman is the product of profound changes in the postwar economic order. "The New Negro Woman has effected a revolutionary orientation . . . ever conscious of her historic and noble mission of doing her bit toward the liberation of her people in particular and the human race in general." Randolph wrote in defense of women's suffrage,<sup>45</sup> advocated "equal pay for . . . men or women doing similar work,"<sup>46</sup> celebrated female voters' disciplined resistance to bribery, and often linked the progressive movement for women's rights and equality with that of workers and of Negroes generally. But Randolph, like many otherwise progressive males of his generation, hardly would have qualified for recognition as a contemporary "feminist." His language was thoroughly masculine, routinely identifying freedom with "manly" discipline and self-reliance as well as using the locution *man* or *men* when referring generally to humanity. And while he was devoted to his wife, Lucille, as a personal and political partner, he was criticized at times—

41 A. Philip Randolph, "Segregation in the Public Schools: A Promise or a Menace," *Messenger*, June 6, 1924, 185–88.

42 A. Philip Randolph, "Marcus Garvey!," *Messenger*, July 1922, 437.

43 Randolph, "Segregation in the Public Schools."

44 Randolph did shift later toward strong support for all-Negro unions, but this was after repeated failures to combat racial discrimination by employers and white employees alike.

45 A. Philip Randolph, "Women Suffrage and the Negro," *Messenger*, November 1917, 6.

46 Randolph, "The Negro and the New Social Order."

including in the 1963 March on Washington<sup>47</sup>—for failing to include women in the top, most publicly visible ranks of movement leadership.

Randolph was a strong believer that peace is essential to the good society. His early writings routinely mention peace—between labor and capital, whites and blacks, and especially nations—as an ideal and a sign of a just, healthy society. “War is an abnormal state in which the man-power and material resources are mobilized in order to function for destruction.”<sup>48</sup> Most modern wars were largely a product of capitalist quests to seize land, natural resources, and cheap labor, he argued. As such, pacifism was a natural outgrowth of his critique of capitalist exploitation and advocacy of social democratic alternatives. Randolph thus publicly protested and urged civil disobedience against US involvement in World War I, leading to his arrest for violating the Espionage Act. His reasoning was that black citizens were as victimized by racist and capitalist enemies within America as by those far away in Europe. “The Negro may be choosing between being burnt by Tennessee, Georgia or Texas mobs or being shot by Germans in Belgium. We don’t know about this pro-Germanism among Negroes. It may be only their anti-Americanism—meaning anti-lynching.”<sup>49</sup> His challenge to Woodrow Wilson in the *Messenger* declared that “lynching, Jim Crow, segregation, discrimination in the armed forces and out, disenfranchisement of millions of black souls in the South—all these make your cry of making the world safe for democracy a sham, a mockery, a rape on decency and a travesty on common justice.”<sup>50</sup> Randolph openly disagreed with other Negro leaders, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, who supported the war, and he decried the mindless patriotism displayed by many as, citing Samuel Johnson, “the last refuge of scoundrels.” Randolph consistently maintained that obligations to participate in and support war are contingent on principled fulfillment of basic commitments and rights by states and dominant groups to workers and minorities. All persons are entitled and even obligated to engage in self-defense, he reasoned, but Negroes had to judge whether their stake in American society was worth defending. “Intelligent Negroes have now reached the point where their support of the country is conditional.” He espoused a “Bolshevik patriotism” grounded in rational, unselfish love for only those nation-states that reciprocated the obligation of equally enforcing citizen rights and providing social welfare.<sup>51</sup> “No one should be loyal to any flag unless the flag is loyal to him.”<sup>52</sup>

Randolph judged the stakes in World War II to be different from those in the

47 Kenneth Mack, *Representing the Race* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2013).

48 Randolph, “The Negro and the New Social Order.”

49 A. Philip Randolph, “Pro-Germanism among Negroes,” *Messenger*, July 1918.

50 Elliott, “Hero of the Democratic Left.”

51 Randolph, “We Want More Bolshevik Patriotism!,” *Messenger*, 29.

52 Randolph, “A Reply to Congressman James F. Byrnes of South Carolina,” *Messenger*, October 1919.

previous war. Again, he assessed the cause of the war in similar terms—“a hapless story of . . . exploitation for the profit and power of a monopoly-capitalist economy” by the “old Anglo-American empire systems” in Europe.<sup>53</sup> He easily justified the campaign “to defeat Nazism, fascism, and militarism on the battlefield,” however, and he professed that “we are loyal, patriotic Americans all.” Even so, once again Negro workers’ obligation to participate in national defense required a judgment about whether winning would bring peace “for democracy, for freedom and the Brotherhood of Man without regard to his pigmentation, land of his birth or the God of his fathers.” In short, war should be avoided in most cases, and only a polity that delivers on promises of securing equal rights for all deserves the sacrifice asked of its citizens. “We seek the right to play our part in advancing the cause of national defense and national unity. But there certainly can be no national unity where one tenth of the population are denied their basic rights as American citizens.”<sup>54</sup> This position provided Randolph the primary principled justification for initially calling for the March on Washington in 1942, which in turn leveraged the executive order beginning to ban racial discrimination in the military and national government hiring practices. While Randolph often has been criticized for calling off the march, his actions seemed consistent with his core principles.

Later in life, Randolph elaborated the fundamental ideas at stake by arguing that basic rights belong to individuals rather than to states. “Civil rights” are as much the “original property and inevitable attribute of the individual as is life.” States do not confer rights, but rather states are obliged to protect the rights with which all persons are endowed. “While the state cannot bestow civil rights on individuals, the state or organized society must, through law, legislation, executive orders, ordinances and court decisions, give recognition to the civil rights of an individual in order that they may have force and factuality.”<sup>55</sup> This statement seemed to be a new formulation for Randolph, but it was consistent with his earlier insistence that the obligation of citizens to states depends on full state enforcement of political, economic, and social rights for all persons. As such, all workers, and black workers in particular, thus have many reasons to challenge laws or policies that demand great sacrifice in capitalist society, but wars and deep economic crises exacerbate the tension, highlight the fundamental principles at stake, and justify civil disobedience and protest. The fact that America was almost always in a war or a deep crisis throughout Randolph’s life made principled struggles over fulfillment of patriotic duties by long-exploited workers, and black workers in particular, a perennial theme of his advocacy efforts.

53 Randolph, “The Call to Negro Americans to March on Washington,” March 1941, *Black Worker* 14 (May 1941), [https://www.norton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch30\\_02.htm](https://www.norton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch30_02.htm).

54 Randolph, “Call to Negro Americans to March on Washington.”

55 Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 196.

In sum, Randolph's pursuit of the good life always entailed the struggle to "move progressively toward durable and just peace, full and fair employment, continue our democratic system, and merit the leadership of the moral forces of the world."<sup>56</sup> He continued to espouse socialism all of his adult life, but over time that term became more of a critical analytical framework and moral standpoint than a realistic radical goal. As he wrote in notes to himself, "Socialism is a useful intellectual tool for the explanation of the course of socio-economic change from capitalism and the basic causes of the present plight of mankind" as well as an aspirational quest. His fundamental position as a mature leader thus was that "the Negro's present plight requires that emphasis be placed on the fight for immediate racial justice while remaining ever mindful of the fact that racial justice is not social justice." It is relevant in this regard that Randolph's writings and speeches embraced consistently the language of "rights," a political discourse that he worked to "radicalize" by insistence on economic as well as social and political entitlements—egalitarian claims about economic rights that ran against the grain of American liberalism. "[A] community is democratic only when the humblest and weakest person can enjoy the highest civil, economic, and social rights that the biggest and most powerful possess."<sup>57</sup> As he often added, "All or none."<sup>58</sup> By the 1940s Randolph more openly linked his aspirations for economic justice, political freedom, and social inclusion to the language of "human rights."<sup>59</sup> This is not surprising, because Randolph, like most progressives, comfortably embraced not just the strategically powerful rhetoric of, but also an apparently deep commitment to, equal rights—civil, political, social, and economic—for all persons.

#### RANDOLPH'S CRITICAL POLITICS OF RIGHTS: AGAINST, BEYOND, AND THROUGH LAW

Randolph's commitment to a radical politics of rights<sup>60</sup> distinguished him from other civil rights activists in his generation as well as from the Old Crowd. In particular, while he collaborated with the legally trained Chandler Owen, Randolph

56 Randolph, "Statement to Political Education Conference in Chicago, Illinois, at the International House," n.d., accessed March 20, 2014, [http://www1.assumption.edu/users/mcclymer/NewNegro/Randolph%20Statement%20to%20Educational%20Political%20Conference%20\[1\].pdf](http://www1.assumption.edu/users/mcclymer/NewNegro/Randolph%20Statement%20to%20Educational%20Political%20Conference%20[1].pdf).

57 Randolph, "Why Should We March?"

58 Cited in Bynum, A. *Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 157.

59 Bynum, A. *Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 85.

60 I intentionally link my interpretation of Randolph to the classic work by Stuart A. Scheingold, *The Politics of Rights: Lawyers, Public Policy, and Political Change* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), and to my own scholarship (see Michael McCann, *Rights at Work: Pay Equity Reform and the Politics of Legal Mobilization* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004]) in this tradition. I did not enter the project of reading Randolph to go in this direction, and my first impressions did not fit this analysis, but persistent scrutiny kept leading me back to this understanding.

displayed no inclination for a career in the legal profession, little faith that the legal system would reliably deliver on its promises, and profound doubt that legal reform alone could produce the types of equality and social justice that he advocated. His politics thus diverged from that of many other young progressive black activists who began by flirting with socialism but developed careers as activist lawyers, seeking to prove their stature among the “talented tenth” by competition with white lawyers in the courtroom, learning the conventions of the white-dominated bar, and using their skills for legal contestation and judicial advancement of rights-oriented social change with little attention to economic justice and positive socioeconomic rights.<sup>61</sup> To be sure, Randolph believed in the principles identified with the rule of law; the rule of legitimate law was central to his socialist vision, just as the commitment to principles of rights was a constant of his radical posture.<sup>62</sup> But American law *in practice* was cause for a great deal of wariness, skepticism, and even cynicism, especially for the young radical.

Indeed Randolph’s radical visions of economic, political, and social rights repeatedly exposed the limitations of liberal legal principles, doctrines, and institutional avenues of change in twentieth-century America. This critique took three different forms; each is outlined in the subsequent sections. All three dimensions of his critical legal theory remained evident even as Randolph shifted emphasis slowly, and strategically, from a “class first” socialist agenda to a race-focused political civil rights agenda. Randolph’s faith in official law did increase over time, as he was forced as a labor leader to employ legal resources for leverage against employers and later found greater success in working with lawyers and through law as a civil rights activist.<sup>63</sup> But he remained wary to the end, and as we shall see, his primary political investments remained outside of the judicial and administrative law arena.

#### DECRYING HYPOCRISY AND LAWLESSNESS: RANDOLPH THE RADICAL REALIST

The plain and simple fact is that until we went into the streets the federal government was indifferent to our demands. . . . Those who deplore our militants, who exhort patience in the name of a false peace, are in fact supporting segregation and exploitation.<sup>64</sup>

61 See Mack, *Representing the Race*, 2013. My long review of this excellent book underlines the “lost promise of civil rights” at stake in the abandonment of socialism and growing inattention to economic justice among most NAACP lawyers. Michael McCann, “The Personal Is Political: On Twentieth Century Activist Lawyers for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties,” *Tulsa Law Review* 49, no. 2 (2014).

62 Bynum underlines Randolph’s “faith in the law and idealistic belief in justice and fair play.” *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 125.

63 See Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, chap. 7.

64 Randolph, “March on Washington.”



The most common and, arguably, powerful rhetorical posture that the young Randolph, and the *Messenger* generally, adopted to advance his adversarial critical agenda was to expose American elites' liberal legal pretenses as hypocritical masks for their "real" intentions and impacts. This project of exposing legal ideals as "shams" and "fraud" is consistent with Marxian characterizations of citizenship rights and legal equality as a "political lion's skin" that masked the alienated greed, lust for exploitation, and conflict inherent in capitalist exchange relations.<sup>65</sup> The posture also converged with, and perhaps drew on, the progressive spirit of "legal realism" that was fomenting in the nation's top law schools beginning early in the century.<sup>66</sup>

The unmasking of pious national idealism as hypocritical lies was a staple of articles in the *Messenger*. In a short article titled "Americanism," Randolph wrote, "It is well to realize at the outset that no matter what a people's professed ideals may be, their real ideals are the ones that assert themselves and give force and direction to the affairs of government." Thus "we find that at the very beginning of our national existence the Declaration of Independence, with all its lofty rhetoric, was signed by slave holders, thereby placing the stamp of hypocrisy on the brow of the new born nation."<sup>67</sup> This pervasive hypocrisy about national ideals was especially prominent with regard to legal principles and important legal texts, whether constitutional, statutory, or judicial. For example, criminal law in application was grounded in falsehoods. "The current notion is that justice should punish the criminal in the interest of the law-abiding citizen. While this is a fallacy, it is, nevertheless, the custom," he wrote glibly.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, vagrancy laws were enforced primarily to crush strikes by workers and labor organizing efforts as well as to "entrench the system or peonage," a condition of "industrial and agricultural serfdom" for poor Negroes that undercut citizen status, produced mass imprisonment, and was chiefly responsible for lynchings.<sup>69</sup>

Randolph and his colleagues also regularly proclaimed that "lawlessness in America proceeds apace."<sup>70</sup> The allegation was a staple of their ongoing protests about lynching, which often was "extra-legal" but routinely supported by and even executed by legal officials. For example, in an article titled "Legalized Lynching," Randolph wrote that a dozen Negroes were convicted for protesting unfair

65 Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/>.

66 Brian Z. Tamanaha, *Beyond the Formalist-Realist Divide: The Role of Politics in Judging* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

67 Randolph, "Americanism," *Messenger*, September 1920.

68 Randolph, "Segregation in the Public Schools," 186. Randolph wrote often of the criminal justice system as a thinly veiled form of violent social control imposed by whites on Negroes, part of the larger pattern of sustaining white "superiority."

69 Randolph, "The Negro and the New Social Order." See also Randolph on "vagrancy laws" in "Legalized Lynching," *Messenger*, February 1920.

70 Randolph, "American Lawlessness," *Messenger*, July 1918.

wages and sentenced to be hung in a “legalized lynching. . . . What an infamous miscarriage of justice!”<sup>71</sup> And the government, while hunting down Bolshevik lawbreakers all over, remained “silent.” “The government which is screaming hysterically about lawlessness in Mexico, is indifferent, while lawlessness runs riot in Arkansas.”<sup>72</sup> Randolph attributed this arbitrary use of legal violence not simply to racial hatred but also to the systematic effort by white capitalist elites to foment “race prejudice” and to “widen the chasm between the races” in ways that undercut class solidarity.<sup>73</sup> An incendiary article called “American Lawlessness” expanded on the point: “How rapidly the wheels of justice move when an alien enemy is touched! And how slowly those wheels grind when local American black citizens are murdered, lynched, mobbed.”<sup>74</sup>

Randolph extended the allegations beyond criminal law to all areas of American legal administration. The *Messenger* editorialized at length about how it was “elementary that the spirit of equality runs neither through the letter nor the administration of American law.” Rather, the “entire warp and woof and fabric of American law” exhibited the “spirit of inequality, injustice, and prejudiced administration.” Especially in times of crisis, “the nation showed no ability to respond to any ideals except the ideals of anarchy, lawlessness, mob violence, lynching autocracy, and falsehood.”<sup>75</sup> A powerful 1917 editorial in the *Messenger* decried the fact that in practice there was “one law for the white man in this country and another for the black man.” The essay continued: “Be not deceived. The law itself is unimportant. The administration is what counts.”<sup>76</sup> American foreign policy was portrayed as equally hypocritical about its moralistic pretenses that masked lawless action. Not only do American statesmen promise rights to “oppressed persons in foreign lands” while trampling the rights of Negroes at home, but they mask their imperial impositions in similarly false terms. “We drove Spain out of the Philippines and kept what we took. . . . We have no more right in the Philippines than Japan in Shantung,” even if American elites rest comfortably with the first and criticize the latter.<sup>77</sup> Even the older, more moderate Randolph who championed civil rights legal-reform efforts clung to skepticism about the gap between laws on the books and law in action. Arguably, this realist emphasis on the gap between ideals of rights and material practice informed and enabled Randolph’s tendency at times to view racism as a *moral* failure rather than a structural

71 Randolph, “Legalized Lynching.”

72 Randolph, “Legalized Lynching.”

73 Randolph, “Lynching: Capitalism Its Cause; Socialism Its Cure,” *Messenger*, March 1919.

74 Randolph, “American Lawlessness.” This statement remains a chillingly timely observation in the US, during its proclaimed War on Terror as much as the World War I context in which Randolph wrote.

75 Randolph, “Professor Harry H. Jones—the Crisis in Negro Leadership,” *Messenger*, April–May 1920; Bynum, A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 91.

76 “The Hanging of the Negro Soldiers,” *Messenger*, January 1918.

77 Randolph, “Americanism,” *Messenger*, September 1920.

feature inherent to the dominant capitalist society. The feature paralleled most closely the views of moderate NAACP legal activists and opened Randolph to later characterizations as a “liberal” rather than radical.

All in all, the young Randolph labored to identify a legitimization crisis in American professions of faith in law and democracy. “We find that the heritage of hypocrisy handed down by the forefathers is still predominant in our present national life.”<sup>78</sup> Negroes are exploited by a “sham democracy” that is “a mockery, a rape on decency and a travesty on common sense.”<sup>79</sup> But this gap between ideals and practice also defined a space for effective radical action. For one thing, rampant unrighteous lawlessness by American elites provided some justification for righteous defiance of law by progressive activists. Hence the logic of civil disobedience against war discussed previously and the logic of law-bending labor strikes and protests that I will discuss below. Moreover, exposing arbitrary and instrumental miscarriages of law also motivated goals of replacing bad, exploitive laws with better, more democratic and just laws. “Some writer once said: ‘Progress in government has been made by repealing bad laws.’”<sup>80</sup> And at other times the moralistic decrying of fraud and hypocrisy justified simply demanding that reactionary people, including both capitalist elites and white workers, who arbitrarily brutalized blacks live up to the principles that they professed. “Lawlessness is putting America in a bad light. I would advise her to square her deeds with her words.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed American hypocrisy was undermining its moral legitimacy with growing segments of its own citizens as well as with populations around the world. And the only way to recover “dignity and meaning” in the idea of “Americanism” was for people to “discard hypocrisy as their chief stock in trade and develop ideals that find expression in deeds instead of mere lofty words.”<sup>82</sup>

### Reversing Rights Priorities, Rethinking the Intersection of Class and Race

Now we know that real freedom will require many changes in the nation’s political and social philosophies and institutions. For one thing, we must destroy the notion that Mrs. Murphy’s property rights include the right to humiliate me because of the color of my skin. The sanctity of private property takes second place to the sanctity of the human personality. It falls to the Negro to reassert this proper pri-

78 Randolph, “Americanism.”

79 Randolph, “Lynching: A Domestic Question,” *Messenger*, July 1919, repr. in *Civil Rights since 1787: A Reader in the Black Struggle*, ed. Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 244–45.

80 Randolph, “Vagrancy Laws.”

81 Randolph, “American Lawlessness.”

82 Randolph, “Americanism,” *Messenger*, September 1920. Of course this argument proved prescient regarding the pressures mobilized during the Cold War to address the southern racist legacy and desegregate public life. See Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

ority of values, because our ancestors were transformed from human personalities into private property.<sup>83</sup>

Randolph's engagement with law transcended mere charges of hypocrisy. A second motif for challenging exploitive hierarchy turned on identifying profound contradictions *within* the basic principles and logics of America's constitutional rights regime. This critical structural insight was more subtle and less amenable to dramatic rhetoric than the gap logic, but it arguably went deeper into the challenges that young radicals like Randolph were compelled to address. At its core was the Marxist understanding of the dual order of liberal capitalist society structured around the competing logics of exchange-based property rights and rights of persons as communal citizens. This duality was at the heart of the contradiction between economic inequality in market society and the illusory promises of citizen equality in the political sphere. In the United States, the prioritization of property rights had been clear from the start; James Madison preached that "the first object" of the constitutional order was the "protection of the different and unequal faculties for acquiring property," from which "ensues a division of society into different interests and parties."<sup>84</sup> And with unequal material control of property came economic, social, and political dominance. This was a central theme for Randolph. As discussed earlier, slavery was grounded in a radical division between slave owners and relatively powerless, propertyless, owned slaves; with the abolition of slavery, capitalism developed deep structural divisions between owners and exploited workers denied fair wages for their work and control over the means of production. In the age of "industrial democracy," Randolph added, "the rights of workers to organize and designate the representatives of their own choosing and to bargain collectively" are subordinated to the rule of the "economic royalists—big business."<sup>85</sup> The result, in Marxian terms, was to render the promises of equal citizenship illusory, as the relationships of market exchange and private ownership eviscerated the abstract rights of equality before the law in civil community. As Randolph put it, "the sanctity of private property" radically undermined "the sanctity of the human personality."<sup>86</sup>

The legally inscribed priority of property rights that secured capitalist domination within the liberal constitutional order thus underlined the challenges facing progressive democratic socialists. Simply decrying the gap between founding legal ideals and lawless practice thus was insufficient; the larger dilemma was embedded in the legally constituted normative structure of the nation. The challenge thus was "how to work out a constructive answer to the question of the

83 Randolph, "March on Washington."

84 James Madison, *Federalist* no. 10.

85 Randolph, "Keynote Address to the Policy Conference of the March on Washington Movement, Detroit," September 26, 1942.

86 Randolph, "March on Washington."

relation between democracy expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the Federal Constitution, we now have, and the change in our social and economic system we now need.”<sup>87</sup> The young Randolph’s answer was that progressives must demand a reversal in the status of core rights that defined the relationship of political democracy to economic life. Progressives thus would have to be very selective about *which* legal ideals and principles of rights they invoked to excoriate existing relations. As a *Messenger* article on “Constitution Day” put it, “We are not very much interested in the Constitution as such, “ but “we are willing to join in the celebration of the Constitution if we may pick out a few specific clauses . . . for reactionaries to observe.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed the core logic of democratic citizenship must be invoked to trump and transform the hierarchical capitalist relations in more egalitarian, democratic directions. “The reconstruction program for the Negro must involve the introduction of a new order—a democratic order in which human rights are recognized above property rights.”<sup>89</sup> It thus was fitting that the National Negro Congress that Randolph founded in 1936 aimed for a “united front” to “place human rights above property rights.”<sup>90</sup>

And it was this recognition of the structural source of class domination in the very constitution of the American legal order that led, or at least supported, Randolph’s “class first” strategy as a young radical. The central problem under slavery, agrarian capitalism, and then industrial capitalism was the same—the grossly unequal power of property owners who exploit workers, whether slaves or wage earners, and undermine the natural equality and solidarity of persons (taught by the Bible). After all, “Negroes are chiefly workers. Ninety-nine percent of them are working people.”<sup>91</sup> And “as workers,’ black and white, we all have one common interest . . . the getting of more wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions.”<sup>92</sup> Randolph recognized that racism, and racially motivated violence, divided whites and blacks, undermining potential for the solidarity needed to exert political control over capital. But his early writings portrayed racial prejudice as largely the product of capitalists and the propertied white elite, who sought to divide black and white workers from one another. “If the employers can keep the white and black dogs, on account of race prejudice, fighting over a bone, the yellow

87 Randolph, Statement to Educational Political Conference in Chicago, Illinois, at the International House, n.d.

88 Randolph, “Constitution Day—September 17,” *Messenger*, September 1919.

89 Randolph, “The Negro and the New Social Order.”

90 Cited in Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ) 20–22. This theme ran deep in black radical thought. See, for example, James Baldwin, “An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis,” November 19, 1970, <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/itcitmbaldwin.html>. The theme is also evident among racialized migrant workers in the same era. See Michael McCann and George Lovell, *Union by Law: Filipino American Labor Activists, Rights Radicalism, and Racial Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

91 Randolph, “The Negro Radicals,” *Messenger*, October 1919.

92 Randolph, “Our Reason for Being.”

capitalist dog will get away with the bone—the bone of profits.”<sup>93</sup> I have already noted Randolph’s observations about how criminal laws, vagrancy laws, and “legalized lynching” contributed to these racial divisions among exploited workers. Hence class solidarity among all workers, of all races, was the best and only hope for realizing the promises of democratic equality and justice—economic, political, and social.<sup>94</sup> While the young Randolph was always aware of the different histories and experiences of blacks and whites, it was this “class first” commitment that animated his embrace of radical socialism as the “cure” for both capitalist and racial hierarchy.

The commitment to prioritizing class over race as both critical analysis and political reconstruction project that would empower black workers was, as noted earlier, critiqued by radical black contemporaries and deeply tested by Randolph’s personal transition from intellectual essayist and editor to practical organizer of black workers in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and struggle with the Pullman Company starting around 1925. In his late writings for the *Messenger* we can already see a move toward emphasizing race as an independent force of hierarchical division in American society. He thus shifted from his early claim that Negroes who failed to join the class struggle were a “menace” undermining radicalism to a position that “no Negro [should] fail in his day of advancing the cause of Negro labor” and communists were the great menace to advancing justice.<sup>95</sup> The change in priorities was forced by the practical reality of white worker racism that impeded the One Big Union aspiration. “Where unions refuse black workers admission into them, the black workers should organize separate unions on their own.” And that prescription increasingly reflected the only viable option for the porters’ union and other black workers. But these vicissitudes along the fault lines of intersecting race and class inequality should not obscure Randolph’s enduring focus on the fundamental contradiction between property rights and equal citizenship rights claims—the central terms of opposition in all of his thought and action. While the relative priorities of each dimension changed over time and with specific context, Randolph never abandoned the commitment to egalitarian change in terms of both class and race equality that was undermined by capitalist propertied relations.<sup>96</sup>

93 Randolph, “Our Reason for Being.”

94 It is relevant that Randolph’s early support for multiracial class solidarity did not keep him from opposing expanded immigration into the United States. Increased immigration would increase the ranks of poorly paid workers, undermine Negro power in the labor market, and impede development of a unified labor movement. See Daryl Scott, “‘Immigrant Indigestion’—A. Philip Randolph: Radical and Restrictionist,” Center for Immigration Studies, June 1, 1999, <http://cis.org/AfricanAmericanAttitudesImmigration-APhilipRandolph>.

95 Randolph, “Negroes and the Labor Movement,” *Messenger*, 1926.

96 Randolph was elusive about what it meant that commitments to equality and respect for all should contain and even replaced capitalist commitments to property and profit. See part 2 of this essay for his general ideals, and the next section for discussion of political strategy.

## POWER POLITICS—BEYOND THE LAW

We are not a pressure group, we are not an organization or a group of organizations, we are not a mob. We are the advanced guard of a massive, moral revolution for jobs and freedom. This revolution reverberates throughout the land touching every city, every town, every village where black men are segregated, oppressed and exploited. . . . We must develop strength. . . . All of us should be prepared to take to the streets.<sup>97</sup>

The final dimension of Randolph's unusually sophisticated political theorizing was his insistence on the extralegal forms of strategic action that must be the focus of political struggle, or at least, in his later life, supplementary to litigation-based disputing. We have already seen that at least in the context of capitalism, the politics of collective group power must confront the concentrated power of capitalists and white supremacists. "In this period of power politics, nothing counts but pressure, more pressure, and still more pressure, through the tactic and strategy of broad, organized, aggressive mass action behind the vital and important issues of the Negro."<sup>98</sup> One consistent message throughout his life was that black Americans must be bold in demanding freedom, justice, equality, and democratic empowerment. His call for collective agency was framed almost exclusively in agonistic, masculine terms. As noted previously, he rejected the reliance on the talented tenth of Negroes or white elite support, and called instead for working-class Negroes to show "faith and confidence . . . in their own power for self-liberation." "This condition of freedom, equality and democracy is not the gift of the gods. It is the task of men, yes, men, brave men, honest men, determined men."<sup>99</sup> While his confrontational style in dealing with white power wielders moderated over time into a capacity for skillful negotiation, Randolph never relinquished his commitment to a politics of organized group power and sacrifice for the greater good. That was perhaps the strongest lesson of history revealed by scientific materialist analysis. "Slavery was not abolished because it was bad and unjust. It was abolished because men fought, bled and died on the battlefield."<sup>100</sup> And it was this confrontational spirit that the young Randolph believed most distinguished his "new" leadership cohort from the Old Crowd of leaders who preached conciliation and "turning the other cheek" to those who wronged Negroes.<sup>101</sup>

97 Randolph, "March on Washington." This quotation underlines the strong moralistic strain that Randolph internalized from his parents and that coexisted with and balanced his socialistic materialism.

98 Randolph, "Call to March on Washington."

99 Randolph, "Call to March on Washington."

100 Randolph, Keynote Address to the Policy Conference of the March on Washington Movement, Detroit, September 26, 1942.

101 The fact that Randolph in practice was rather less effective in organizing and leading black workers at the grassroots—after all, he led a union to which he never belonged as a worker—than

Randolph understood that power takes different forms, ranging from force to fraud to education. He always defended individual willingness to use violence in self-defense against extreme violence by others, but he was committed to developing peaceful forms of organized action—labor strikes and mass marches and demonstrations were his forte—to apply political force or “pressure” whenever possible. But organizing black workers was no easy task; it required persistent efforts to educate and raise the consciousness of ordinary black citizens who long had been depoliticized and disempowered, in part due to the influence of the older generation of leaders. New Negro leaders thus worked tirelessly to inform and inspire ordinary people. In his classic 1919 essay in the *Messenger* titled “Our Reason for Being,” he called for “a leadership of uncompromising manhood. It is not asking for half a loaf but for the whole loaf. It is insistent upon the Negro workers exacting justice, both from the white labor unions and from the capitalists or employers.”<sup>102</sup> His essays in the *Messenger* repeatedly blamed “ignorance or errors” among ordinary Negroes as a key obstacle to emancipation.<sup>103</sup> The key tasks thus were, first, to “educate Negroes so that they may understand their class interests,” and then to convince union radicals that “organized labor must harness the discontent of Negroes and direct it into working class channels for working class emancipation.”<sup>104</sup> Organizing black workers through and beyond unions was important not just for exercising collective influence on the white capitalist power structure but also for empowering Negroes’ sense of self-worth, agency, and confidence, which had been undermined by many decades of oppression. Once Randolph shifted toward a “race first” strategic position, he tilted in many regards toward what later would be deemed Black Power. “The essential value of an all-Negro movement. . . is that it helps to create faith by Negroes in Negroes. It develops a sense of self-reliance with Negroes depending on Negroes in vital matters. It helps to break down the slave psychology and inferiority complex in Negroes which comes and is nourished with Negroes relying on white people for direction and support.” Again, the modernist theme of mass Negro “self-reliance” increasingly joined, and perhaps even displaced, Randolph’s early idealistic hopes of multiracial worker alliances.<sup>105</sup>

But organization of black workers was not enough. Effective action required sophisticated analysis and strategy grounded in realistic, “scientific” assessment of

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in negotiating with white business and government elites marks another contradiction opening him to critical charges of liberal reformism from later, often younger black radicals.

<sup>102</sup> Randolph, “Our Reason for Being.”

<sup>103</sup> “Unless the Negro is unionized and the Negro public educated as to the nature and aims of radical movements, the Negro constitutes a definite menace to radicalism in America.” Randolph, “The Negro Worker: A Menace to Radicalism,” *Messenger*, May/June 1919.

<sup>104</sup> Randolph, “The Negro Worker: A Menace to Radicalism,” *Messenger*, May/June 1919.

<sup>105</sup> In a 1941 statement to the press, Randolph wrote that “power and pressure do not reside in the few, and intelligentsia, they lie in and flow from the masses. Power does not even rest with the masses as such. Power is an active principle of only the organized masses, the masses united for a definite purpose.” “Call to March on Washington.”



material conditions and how they can be changed. The key is that “the know-how of strategy, the ways of getting things done, must stem from the know-what and know-why of facts, causes and principles, that underlie the problem.”<sup>106</sup> Negro workers needed more than organization; they needed “mass organization with an action program, aggressive, bold, and challenging in spirit.”<sup>107</sup> As I have repeatedly emphasized, Randolph’s strategic gambits changed over time, morphing from an early focus on alliances with specific white-dominated unions and third parties (socialists) to organized marches and protest by ordinary black people to leverage negotiations by black representatives, like Randolph, with presidents and lawmakers. The threatened march of 1942 that leveraged executive action to desegregate the military and defense industry and the 1963 march to leverage the 1964 Civil Rights Act were the most notable examples of his mature strategy of direct, nonviolent “power politics.” But Randolph was constantly engaged with similar strategic leveraging against the Pullman corporation for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and, in his middle years, with the AFL, CIO, and other unions. The constants in his strategic outlook were avoidance of, or at least extreme wariness toward, the two mainstream political parties, which he ridiculed as “Tweedledum and Tweedledee,” and skepticism toward litigation and negotiation absent grassroots strategies for mass pressure.

In these regards, Randolph forged his career as a radical magazine editor and advocate, and then as a labor leader, along paths that were quite different from both the high-profile NAACP lawyers and the religious leaders identified with the civil rights movement. Arguably, Randolph was the most important and sophisticated *political* strategist in the twentieth-century civil rights movement. His focus on mass action to force political negotiations with elected leaders, federal court decisions, and broad publicity campaigns was influential and perhaps unmatched. He captured best his role in the legacy of the long struggle.

We are creatures of history . . . for every historical epoch has its roots in a preceding epoch. The black militants of today are standing upon the shoulders of the New Negro radicals of my day, the twenties, thirties, and forties. We stood upon the shoulders of the civil rights fighters of the Reconstruction era and they stood upon the shoulders of the black abolitionists. These are the interconnections of history, and they play their role in the course of development.<sup>108</sup>

### Conclusion: Radicalizing Rights

A. Philip Randolph began as an incendiary socialist magazine editor and transitioned into various roles as an innovative organizational leader, specifically

<sup>106</sup> Randolph, “Statement to Educational Political Conference,” 1.

<sup>107</sup> Randolph, “Statement to Educational Political Conference,” 1.

<sup>108</sup> “A. Philip Randolph: Labor’s Grand Old Man,” interview by Phyl Garland, *Ebony*, May 1969, 31.

for black union workers and generally for the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement in the United States. Unlike many liberal black civil rights lawyers of his era, he never gave in to the manifold forces that narrowed civil rights activism to a focus on state-mandated desegregation and formal legal equality for African Americans, other minorities, and women. Randolph's wariness toward the American legal system animated his powerful rhetoric, informed his deep structural critique of the links between liberal legalism and capitalism, and shaped his political strategizing about advancing egalitarian social change. He was committed to cleansing official law of both arbitrary and systematic protections for racial privilege, to be sure. But he was even more committed to promoting structural reforms that counterbalanced the property rights of the capitalist owning class with expanded entitlements of all citizens to economic security, labor union clout in the workplace, and more equitable distribution of material wealth. Throughout his life Randolph sustained this focus on worker empowerment and economic justice as the radical promise of civil rights,<sup>109</sup> and on mass citizen action as the essential means of political transformation to realizing these rights in practice. "May we strive for a socialized economy and a democratized society," he concluded one of his most important speeches.<sup>110</sup> And it is this unrelenting commitment to democratic socialist transformation that defines his most important inspiration in our present age of rapidly accelerating economic inequality, systemic social injustice, and a ruling ideology of colorblind legal justice.

<sup>109</sup> My summary statement indirectly engages Risa Goluboff's important argument about "the lost promise of civil rights" in the middle of the twentieth century. Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>110</sup> Randolph, "Statement to Educational Political Conference."

## 13: Zora Neale Hurston's Radical Individualism

Farah Jasmine Griffin

Zora Neale Hurston befuddles. Though she is widely recognized as a brilliant novelist and as an anthropologist who pioneered an ethnographic methodology, her politics have evoked a more ambivalent response. Critics portray her as reactionary and imperialist; defenders focus on her literary genius, her intellectual originality, and her nuanced attention to black folk cultures. She has been claimed by feminists, black conservatives, black nationalists, and libertarians. As a novelist, playwright, aesthetic theorist, and ethnographer, she took black humanity and complexity seriously. The innovative nature of her work, her refusal of respectability politics, her insistence on women's sexual, political, and intellectual freedom all seem in conflict with what we have come to think of as black conservatism. However, her nearly uncritical celebration of the United States, her lack of attention to racial hostilities, and her fervent anticommunism all align her with the political Right. Elements of her conservatism are evident throughout her career. Her admiration for Booker T. Washington and her ongoing and needling critiques of W. E. B. Du Bois contain seeds that blossomed into a more full-fledged conservative political stance during the last decade of her life. Interestingly, she nonetheless was a staunch anticolonialist.

Throughout her life Hurston was disdainful of those who insist upon black pathology, instead choosing to focus her own work on black possibility, creativity, and resilience. She often does so to such an extreme that she seems blind to black suffering and structural inequality beyond that which is imposed by de facto Jim Crow. Although she claims no interest in history, on the occasions when she does turn to history as a source of explanation, she may be accused of profound historical misinterpretations. This is most evident in her understanding of Reconstruction. For Hurston, it was an era of widespread political fraud and corruption on the part of outsiders from the North and blacks who were not yet ready for the full responsibilities of citizenship.

This essay seeks to situate Hurston within a broader context of African American political thought and in so doing demonstrate the way she occupies a unique position that eschews social conservatism while embracing political conservatism even as she advances a protofeminist and anticolonial politics. For my purposes, social conservatism is an ideology that seeks to preserve traditional beliefs

about religion, sexuality, and marriage. Political conservatism distinguishes itself from any form of collectivism, insists on the rights of individuals, and emphasizes freedom of choice. For political conservatives government should empower individuals rather than solve social problems. Interestingly, Hurston supported the US occupation of Haiti but later launched profound anticolonial critiques of the United States and Europe.

Although she is an unconventional woman, a feminist who focuses her attention on working-class, working poor, migrant workers, she is in no way a part of the black radical tradition. Instead she most often espouses a kind of liberal individualism, which at its extreme may turn into libertarianism. For Hurston, government intrusion into or interference with individual interests is the greatest threat to democracy. Significantly, when writing about the black expressive culture, she highlights the achievements of the collective; in her more political writing, she emphasizes the individual.

Much has been written about the civic and institutional contexts that may have influenced Hurston's worldview: her hometown, Eatonville, Florida, a black town a few miles east of Orlando, and black educational institutions. As a child she attended the Robert Hungerford Normal and Industrial School, founded by Russell and Mary Calhoun, graduates of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. In fact, one of the school's first buildings was named Booker T. Washington Hall, and Washington was an early patron of the institution.<sup>1</sup> Hurston later attended college preparatory classes at Morgan Academy in Baltimore. The academy was the high school of Morgan College, another black institution of higher education. From Morgan she went on to the most prestigious of the black universities, Howard. For most of her life Hurston lived and was educated in primarily black contexts; consequently she was surrounded by black excellence and heterogeneity. Unlike W. E. B. Du Bois and Jean Toomer, she did not have to travel south as a young adult to familiarize herself with southern life. She was reared in the thick of it.

With this foundation, in 1925 she moved to New York, where she lived at times in Harlem, and where she eventually attended Barnard College and Columbia University. At these two institutions she was introduced to the study of anthropology, a discipline that she credits with giving her the critical tools and distance she needed to research the cultures that produced her. The type of anthropology she encountered at Columbia under the tutelage of teachers like Franz Boas also helped to legitimate her sense of the richness of black vernacular cultures, their inherent Africanness, and the relationship between the folk practices of the black South and those of the African Diaspora in the Americas. All of these settings no doubt helped inform Hurston's politics. However, for our purposes, her writing—

<sup>1</sup> Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 35.

both her fiction and her nonfiction—offers the best articulation of her political thought over time.

Hurston's aesthetic theories as expressed in a series of essays emphasize black cultural genius and originality. Of the novels, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) are of special interest. The former presents the heroic individual as feminist heroine, and the latter attends to questions of power, governance, leadership, and nation building under the leadership of the charismatic Moses. Hurston's ethnographic writings, particularly *Tell My Horse* (1938), share a concern with possibilities of black self-governance. In *Tell My Horse*, her ethnography of Jamaica and Haiti, Hurston both humanizes Voodoo, treating it is an important world religion, while at the same time endorsing the US occupation as what John Carlos Rowe calls "a sort of benevolent political and economic intervention, which should be accompanied by qualified efforts to 'win the hearts and minds' of the Haitian elite to democratic ideals and institutions."<sup>2</sup>

Hurston's most sustained aesthetic statement, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), synthesizes dominant elements of black expressive culture. For Hurston aesthetic excellence signifies the health and wholeness of the people. Consequently, in this view slavery did not leave black people damaged. The depth of their culture provides proof of their endurance, strength, and creativity. It is possible that aesthetic achievement informs her sense that blacks need few social or political remedies save the removal of barriers to their achievement. Originality is a hallmark of genius. Hurston locates black genius not in exceptional individuals but in the masses of unknown, unnamed black people who have produced a distinct aesthetic sensibility. For Hurston, black aesthetics are distinct from, and in many ways completely opposite of, Western aesthetics. She writes: "The Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of white civilization, everything he touches is reinterpreted for his own use. He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine and most certainly the religion of his new country."<sup>3</sup> In America black and Western aesthetics have encountered each other, and while both have been affected, the sheer power of black expressive culture has all but transformed whites who come into contact with it. Black expression is black power.

The essay "Spirituals and Neo-spirituals," published in Nancy Cunard's *Negro: An Anthology* of 1934, extends concepts of "characteristics" by narrowing on one form: the spirituals. Here Hurston takes one of her first published jabs at Du Bois. Though she never names him, she asserts, "The idea that the whole body of spirituals are 'sorrow songs' is ridiculous. They cover a whole wide range of subjects

<sup>2</sup> John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U. S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 283.

<sup>3</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 838. Originally published in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard (1934).

from peevish or gossip to Death and Judgment.” Du Bois famously closed his *Souls of Black Folk* with a chapter titled “The Sorrow Songs,” an eloquent description, analysis, and theorizing of the meaning of black religious songs. Hurston not only challenges his description but also questions his sources. Du Bois draws upon concertized spirituals made famous by groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Hurston writes: “There never has been a presentation of genuine Negro Spirituals to any audience anywhere. What is being sung by the concert artists and the glee clubs are the works of Negro composers or adaptors *based* on the spirituals.”<sup>4</sup> Implicit in her critique of Du Bois is the assertion that his interpretation is elitist and values European aesthetic norms. Hurston draws a metaphorical line in the sand here. The venerable Dr. Du Bois is wrong, far removed from the folk culture he seeks to explain.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is celebrated as a feminist classic, a tale of a woman’s coming to self-actualization, sexual fulfillment, and spiritual maturity. It embodies the characteristics of black expression that Hurston identifies: storytelling, spirituality, drama, poetic language, and humor. The novel is all of this and more. It also contains Hurston’s understanding of the complex relationship between her insights into black culture and the ways this understanding informs her political stances. The novel is unconcerned with overt acts of racial injustice, though the legacy of slavery haunts. White people do not occupy center stage, nor are they villains when they do appear. Black people are not concerned with what whites think or do. The novel presents the poetics of black language in the context of autonomous black spaces. The removal of whites from the novel’s center allows for an exploration of the full range of black humanity: black joy, laughter, heterogeneity, gender conflict, love, passion, betrayal, and class and color politics. Although it need not be the case, Hurston’s choice to remove whites from the narrative’s center at times eschews the reality of racist oppression.<sup>5</sup> There are at least two instances where the absence of white racial oppression seem implausible: (1) the enduring legacy of slavery exists only in Nanny’s efforts to police Janie’s sexuality, and (2) though the novel highlights the diverse cultures of blacks in southern Florida, it does not acknowledge their economic exploitation. A largely autonomous black world allows Hurston to attend to the particularities and specificities of black southern life while at the same time touching upon themes that concern all beyond the boundaries of race, region, and nation.

In *Their Eyes* that black world is inhabited by a diversity of black people. Janie’s color, beauty, and economic security allow her to travel her route to self-discovery. For our purposes, the most relevant part of *Their Eyes* is the conversation Janie

4 Zora Neale Hurston, “Spirituals and Negro Spirituals,” in *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 870.

5 Removing whites from the center of the narrative does not have to eschew this reality. Toni Morrison’s novels are a case in point. Whites do not figure prominently in the majority of Morrison’s texts, yet in these novels the power of racism to shape the lives of black characters is quite clear.

has with the elitist, color-struck, class-conscious Mrs. Turner. An unattractive woman, Mrs. Turner nonetheless takes great pride in her features: "Her nose was slightly pointed and she was proud. Her thin lips were ever a delight to her eyes. Even her buttocks in bas-relief were a source of pride. To her way of thinking all these things set her aside from other Negroes."<sup>6</sup> Turner is attracted to Janie's "coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair" but is unforgiving about her choice to marry Tea-Cake, a dark-skinned man. She refers to other blacks as "common niggers." While Janie (and Hurston) revel in the diversity of black folk in black spaces, Mrs. Turner "never dreamt so many different kins ub black folks could collect in one place. . . . Ah ain't uster 'ssociatiin' wid black folks."<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Turner is the embodiment of a light-skinned elite who hold darker, poorer blacks in contemptuous disdain. "We ought to lighten up the race," she tells Janie. Of poor blacks she says, "Ah don't blame the white folks for haten em cause Ah can't stand 'em mah self." She is portrayed in ways that make the reader hold her at a critical distance. The novel depicts her as a hateful and ridiculous figure. Janie counters her with a more capacious understanding of black identity: "We uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks. How come you so against Black?"<sup>8</sup> Turner despises all the things Hurston holds dear: black laughter, black performativity, black language, play, and humor. She won't even patronize black professionals.

Turner tries to lure Janie away from the dark-skinned Tea Cake and introduce her to her brother, who recently delivered a paper on Booker T. Washington and "tore him tuh pieces!" Turner offers her own critique of Washington: "All he ever done was cut de monkey for white folks. So dey pumped him up. But you know whut dey folks say 'de higher de monkey climbs de mo' he shows folks his behind' so dats de way it wuz wid Booker T. Mah brother hit him every time dey give him chance to speak." Janie replies, "Ah was raised on de notion dat he wuz uh great big man." Then, Hurston writes, "according to all Janie had been taught this was sacrilege, so she sat without speaking at all." If Janie remains silent, the narrator does not; she defines Mrs. Turner as someone who worships whiteness and "built an altar to the unattainable—Caucasian characteristics for all. Her god would smite her, would hurl her from pinnacles and lose her in deserts but she would not forsake his altars."<sup>9</sup>

In a book that makes no reference to any historic or living figure, it is quite telling that Hurston choses to have Janie admire Booker T. Washington, and that she places the critique of Washington in the mouth of a figure like Mrs. Turner, who represents what Hurston most disdained about the black elite. Here she is taking sides in the Washington–Du Bois debates, and while Janie is rendered mute in

6 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 140.

7 Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 140.

8 Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 141.

9 Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 145.

the face of the Du Bosian position, Hurston is not. Hurston is critical of the anti-Washington Harlem-based black elite, the Du Boisian black elite, who hold black southerners and dark-skinned poor blacks in utter contempt, who have “classed off” to themselves, yet whose livelihoods and social position depend upon those they disdain. She frequently said that Booker T. Washington was the last great black leader, a son of the South, an institution builder, a strategist who worked within the confines of Jim Crow and white supremacy to build a black educational institution and a highly effective political machine. As such, he is not unlike the founders of black towns such as Eatonville. Most significantly, Hurston believes Washington remained true to black people. In contrast to Marcus Garvey, whom Hurston claimed took his followers’ money and kept it for his own use, she insists, “Booker T. Washington had achieved some local notice for collecting monies and spending it on a Negro school. It had never occurred to him to keep it.”<sup>10</sup>

Her admiration for Washington is expressed in her nonfiction writing as well. Hurston was invited to write an entry for the *Encyclopedia Americana* in 1947. Her entry replaced Du Bois’s essay on the “Negro in America,” which had appeared in various editions of the encyclopedia since 1904. Hurston’s essay praises Washington for “making a place for ‘Negro untouchables,’ and for never uttering a ‘public word or [writing] a line concerning what came to be known as the controversy between himself and Dr. DuBois,” whereas Du Bois, she insinuated, did nothing for “the man farthest down’ and used his writing to attack Washington unfairly.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Hurston’s essay differs from Du Bois’s in its assessment of Reconstruction. Whereas Du Bois challenged received notions of the failures of Reconstruction, Hurston writes, “What should have come to the Negro after a period of preparation, was thrust upon him while still in a state of unreadiness, leaving him not only maladjusted to his surroundings, but retarded in progress for generations.”<sup>12</sup> This is one of her first discussions of Reconstruction, one upon which she would elaborate in later writings. Her view of the period is a conservative one, which aligns with the Dunning School’s interpretation (one which was challenged by Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* of 1935 but nonetheless continued to hold sway for decades). Historians of the Dunning School, named for Columbia University professor William Archibald Dunning, argued that the freedmen were incapable of self-governance and this made their segregation and disenfranchisement necessary. Eric Foner, also a professor of history at Columbia, writes that the Dunning School “was not only an interpretation of history. It was part of the edifice of the Jim Crow System.”<sup>13</sup>

10 Hurston quoted in Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, 109.

11 Zora Neale Hurston: *A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 442.

12 Zora Neale Hurston: *A Life in Letters*, 374.

13 Eric Foner, “How Radical Change Occurs: An Interview with Historian Eric Foner,” by Mike Konczal, *Nation*, February 3, 2015, [www.thenation.com/article/how-radical-change-occurs-interview-historian-eric-foner/](http://www.thenation.com/article/how-radical-change-occurs-interview-historian-eric-foner/).



Hurston paints the freedmen of Reconstruction much in the same way she portrays the Hebrews following their escape from Egypt in the novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. Moses is a visionary and a nation builder “wishing for a country he had never seen. He was seeing visions of a nation he had never heard of where there would be more equality of opportunity and less difference between top and bottom.” He dreams of an egalitarian society, and while the people he leads long for a strongman, a king, he wants only to bring laws so that they may govern themselves. In Moses’s mouth Hurston puts forth a vision of a free people and their responsibilities to themselves and others: “‘This freedom is a funny thing,’ he told them. ‘It ain’t something permanent like rocks and hills. It’s like manna; you just got to keep gathering it fresh every day. If you don’t one day you’re going to find you ain’t got any no more. . . . You done got free of Pharaoh and Egyptian oppressors, be careful you don’t rise up none among yourselves.’”<sup>14</sup>

Here freedom is a process requiring constant vigilance. It is precarious and can easily give way to oppression, which is always waiting to emerge. Furthermore, movements against oppression have the potential to become sources of oppression once they are in the position to govern. There is the suggestion that people are ultimately more committed to maintaining their positions of power and superiority than they are to equality. Freedom requires us to resist this temptation. Finally, freedom is something the individual must acquire and maintain for herself. Toward the novel’s end, Moses reflects:

He had meant to make a perfect people, free and just, noble and strong, that should be a light for all the world and for time and eternity. And he wasn’t sure he had succeeded. He had found out that no man may make another free. Freedom was something internal. The outside signs were just signs and symbols of the man inside. All you could do was to give the opportunity for freedom and the man himself must make his own emancipation. He remembered how often he had had to fight Israel to halt a return to Egypt and slavery. Responsibility had seemed too awful to them time and time again.<sup>15</sup>

While generations of black Americans found inspiration in the tales of the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt, Hurston returns to that oft-told tale to highlight the struggles of freedom. Moses is liberator of a people, but only the individual can truly free herself.

In Hurston’s oeuvre, nowhere is the threat to freedom more evident than in the Caribbean, especially Haiti. She travels to Jamaica and Haiti as a student of anthropology, convinced of the value of black culture, seeking commonality and continuity between the black cultures of the southern United States and those of these two black island states. Although she does identify both similarities and dif-

<sup>14</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 75, 268.

<sup>15</sup> Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, 282.

ferences in religion and song, the Hurston of this text emerges as distinctly American. In an insightful essay titled “Zora’s Politics: A Brief Introduction,” the most thorough analysis of Hurston’s political thought to date, Ernest Julius Mitchell II explains that “the unifying thread across Hurston’s various political writings is a staunch anticolonial position. . . . Her support for America’s ideals did not blind her to its many political problems. However, the fact that the United States had no colonies when Europe was rocked by waves of decolonization made Hurston’s critique of America milder than one might expect.”<sup>16</sup> Recounting visits to Jamaica and Haiti in *Tell My Horse*, Hurston is uncritical of the United States. In fact, at times she is celebratory to the extent of exaggerating the freedoms enjoyed by American citizens. For instance, the controversial chapter “Women in the Caribbean” juxtaposes the near gender equality of the US to oppressive and retrograde gender conditions in Jamaica. The United States that Hurston describes is so supportive of women’s rights as to be unrecognizable. According to Hurston, in the United States

the majority of men in all the states are pretty much agreed that just for being born a girl-baby you ought to have laws and privileges and pay and perquisites. And so far as being allowed to voice opinions is concerned, why they consider that you are born with the law in your mouth, and that is not a bad arrangement either. The majority of the solid citizens strain their ears trying to find out what it is that their womenfolk want so they can strain around and try to get it for them, and that is a very good idea and the right way to look at things.<sup>17</sup>

At the time of the book’s publication, large swaths of African American women were disenfranchised and barred from various forms of employment and even from attending certain educational institutions. Hurston’s is a romanticized view of her country; America serves as an idealized model. Earlier in the text she distinguishes between the Jamaicans, who are British subjects, and American Negroes, who are citizens of the United States. She writes:

So in Jamaica it is the aim of everybody to talk English, act English and look English. And that last specification is where the greatest difficulties arise. It is not so difficult to put a coat of European culture over African culture, but it is next to impossible to lay a European face over an African face in the same generation. . . . The color line in Jamaica between the white Englishman and the blacks is not as sharply drawn as between the mulattoes and the blacks. . . . There is a frantic stampede white-ward to escape from Jamaica’s black mass.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ernest Julius Mitchell II, “Zora’s Politics: A Brief Introduction,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 5, no. 1 (September 2013): 2.

<sup>17</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 57.

<sup>18</sup> Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 6.

She notes that although some black Americans, including Frederick Douglass, believed that the Negro must be absorbed by whites, in contrast, the “American Negro” has instead attempted “to achieve a position equal to the white population in every way but each race to maintain its separate identity.”<sup>19</sup> For Hurston, Jamaican mulattoes constitute a class of Mrs. Turners who because they are outnumbered by the blacks are destined to fail unless they convince the blacks “to cease reproduction.”<sup>20</sup> But Hurston sees “a new day in sight for Jamaica as blacks begin to respect themselves and cherish their folk culture.”

If embracing black culture brings a new day to Jamaica by elevating the cultural contributions of the black masses, in Haiti a perceived valorization of blacks and the ongoing divide between them and the mulattoes is often exploited by those in political power. As the text turns to Haiti it describes the brutal massacre leading to ouster of President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, the culmination of over four hundred years of violence in this, the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere. The brutality of slavery is replaced by the brutality of black and mulatto regimes. Peace and stability come only with the arrival of the USS *Washington*, whose smoke “was a black plume with a white hope,” bringing “the end of the revolution and the beginning of peace.”<sup>21</sup> In subsequent chapters Hurston defends the occupation, identifying it as a period of peace and prosperity, with no mention of the atrocities that occurred under the Americans, who occupied the nation and controlled its military and economy from 1915 to 1934.<sup>22</sup> Hurston portrays Haiti as a nation rich in culture and spirituality yet incapable of self-governance and unable to escape violence and exploitation at the hands of internal and external actors.

For Hurston, Jamaica and Haiti are spaces populated by black majorities but divided by class and color within and subjected to European and American powers from without. Under such conditions political freedom is impossible. The position of the American Negro under the US rule of law is represented as virtually ideal. In order to do this Hurston must all but ignore the obstacles black Americans face to achieving full citizenship within the borders of a nation that needs but all too often despises them.

Hurston’s most explicit political statements began to appear during the postwar years. From 1943 to 1954 Hurston wrote a series of nonfiction essays, articles, and chapters, which grew increasingly right wing. These pieces—“Seeing the World as I See It,” “Crazy for This Democracy,” “I Saw Negro Votes Peddled,” “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism,” “Court Order Can’t Make Races Mix”—

19 Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 7.

20 Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 7.

21 Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 72.

22 Mitchell argues that Hurston “emphasizes her disdain for the occupation with total silence.” Furthermore he takes the position that that when she does speak or write about marines in her correspondence, she is overwhelmingly negative. This is an especially generous reading of Hurston’s stance on the occupation.

demonstrate the growth of her own particular brand of conservatism and yield a series of repeated images, tropes, and metaphors that give life to her political understanding of race, state power, and history.

The most comprehensive statement of Hurston's politics did not appear in print during her lifetime. The original manuscript of her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on Road* (1942), contained a chapter titled "Seeing the World as I See It."<sup>23</sup> Here Hurston articulates her commitment to individualism, her critique of race leadership, and her opposition to American and European imperialism. It was excised at the insistence of the publisher, J. P. Lippincott. (Similarly, Richard Wright's publishers had him excise the final chapters of his own autobiography, *Black Boy*. The removed part was later published as *American Hunger*.) The chapter contains echoes of an earlier essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928), but goes into much greater depth about the ideas that shape her worldview. In the opening paragraphs, Hurston asserts, "I found that I had no need of either class or race prejudice, those scourges of humanity. The solace of easy generalization was taken from me, but I received the richer gift of individualism."<sup>24</sup> In light of this she rejects constructs such as "Race Problem, Race Pride, Race Man or Woman, Race Solidarity, Race Consciousness and Race Leader."<sup>25</sup> She sees no need for race pride for blacks or whites because "what seems race achievement is the work of individuals."<sup>26</sup> Race pride and race consciousness have been deadly, according to Hurston, holding humanity back rather than advancing it. Race pride and race consciousness "is the root of misunderstanding and hence misery and injustice. I cannot, with logic cry against it in others and wallow in it myself."<sup>27</sup> This is not the stance of a black nationalist. Instead Hurston argues for a radical individualism. She eschews any notion of race solidarity and insists: "Negroes are just like anybody else. Some soar. Some plod ahead. Some just make a mess and step back in it—like the rest of America and the world."<sup>28</sup> Later on she writes, "Let him who can, go up, and him who cannot stay there, mount down to the level his capabilities rate."<sup>29</sup> Thus she is against Jim Crow because it is an artificial barrier, but beyond its removal she sees no reason for radical societal transformation.

It seems to me if I say a whole system must be upset for me to win I am saying that I cannot sit in the game, and that safer rules must be made to give me a chance. I repudiate that. If others are in there, deal a hand and let me see what I can make of it, even though I know some in there are dealing from the bottom and cheating

23 All references to this chapter refer to the version in the Library of America volume: *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*.

24 *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 782.

25 *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 783.

26 *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 783.

27 *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 784.

28 *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 785.

29 *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 794.

like hell in other ways. If I can win anything in a game like that, I know I'll end up with the pot if the sharks can be eliminated.<sup>30</sup>

Thus Hurston has no place for a structural critique and sees little impediment to the mobility of exceptional blacks in a world where they are allowed to soar. She acknowledges race prejudice but dismisses it as "the last refuge of the weak." Hurston sees individuals as the crux of democracy.

History does not fare well in this chapter. "Since I wash myself of race pride and repudiate race solidarity, by the same token I turn my back upon the past. I see no reason to keep my eyes fixed on the dark years of slavery and the Reconstruction, I am three generations removed from it, and therefor have no experience of the thing."<sup>31</sup> Here she is Janie, leaving Granny to history while her eyes are turned to the horizon. In dismissing history, she also dismisses its legacies and refuses to see the way it informs and shapes the world she inhabits.

Hurston devotes a significant portion of the essay to the great distance between theories of democracy and its failed practice. Here we see the seeds of the essay that would become "Crazy about This Democracy." For Hurston the exercise of imperialism and colonialism by Western democracies is hypocritical. She sarcastically writes,

But must a nation suffer from lack of prosperity and expansion by lofty concepts? Not at all! If a ruler can find a place way off where the people do not look like him, kill enough of them to convince the rest that they ought to support him with their lives and labor, that ruler is hailed as a great conqueror, and people build monuments to him. The very weapons he used are also honored. They picture him in unforgetting stone with the sacred tool of his conquest in his hand. Democracy like religion never was designed to make our profits less.<sup>32</sup>

America is no better than Britain in this regard: "We, too, have our Marines in China. We, too, consider machine gun bullets good laxatives for heathens who get constipated with toxic ideas about a country of their own."<sup>33</sup>

After a lengthy and profound critique of America's imperialism, Hurston concludes, "I do not brood, however, over the wide gaps between ideals and practices. The world is too full of inconsistencies for that."<sup>34</sup> In fact, she asserts a refusal to join the party of protest. She sees no use in protesting for better conditions for workers. "I will join no protests for the boss to put a little more stuffing in my bunk. I don't even want the bunk. I want the bosses' bed."<sup>35</sup> She believes

30 Hurston: *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 794.

31 Hurston: *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 787.

32 Hurston: *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 790.

33 Hurston: *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 791.

34 Hurston: *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 793.

35 Hurston: *Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 793–94.

the United States to be a place where social and economic mobility is possible, so there is no need for organized protest. She will later elaborate upon this in her most right-wing article, "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism" (1951),<sup>36</sup> which goes beyond the anticommunism of mainstream black political figures and organizations to castigate by name former friends, acquaintances, and colleagues including Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Aspirational and forward looking, Hurston fails to heed black suffering, fails to acknowledge the violence black people, particularly black southerners, encountered daily, in large part because these realities existed alongside the abundance of creativity, joy, and human complexity that she elsewhere celebrates.

When Hurston is critical of the United States, it is for its foreign more than its domestic policies. In these contexts she expresses her strong anticolonialism. "Crazy for This Democracy," published in the *Negro Digest* in December 1945,<sup>37</sup> chastises the US for interfering in European wars in Asia and for excluding Asia and Africa from the Atlantic Charter. She humorously notes that the US is not the "Arsenal of Democracy" that it has claimed to be; instead it is the "arse-and-all," "The Ass-and-All of Democracy, which "has shouldered the load of subjugating the dark world completely."<sup>38</sup> It is through the critique of her nation's activities in Africa and Asia, that Hurston identifies limitations on the practice of democracy within that nation's borders. Noting her love and longing for democracy, she writes, "The only thing that keeps me from pitching headlong into the thing is the presence of numerous Jim Crow laws on the statute books of the nation. I am crazy about the idea of this Democracy. I want to see how it feels. Therefor I am for the repeal of every Jim Crow law in the nation here and now."<sup>39</sup> But instead of meeting its demise, Jim Crow was spreading like a cancer, north to Canada and across the Atlantic to South Africa. According to Hurston, the purpose of racial segregation is to instill in the mind of white children the conviction of their superiority and in the minds of dark children their own inferiority. But, she asserts, protest addresses the symptom and not the disease; it may dismantle one law but not the system of laws. Hurston calls for the repeal of all Jim Crow laws once and for all for both "the benefit of this nation and as a precedent to the world." She calls on the United States to demonstrate leadership in this regard for the health of democracy at home and abroad. Importantly, in this essay Franklin Delano Roosevelt is the political figure for whom Hurston reserves her harshest critique: his foreign policy supports colonizing nations, and his domestic policy addresses racial segregation in a piecemeal fashion, if at all. But Hurston's critique of the US is as a devoted citizen who wishes her nation to be a good actor in the world, an example

36 Zora Neale Hurston, "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism" (1951), repr. *Journal of American Studies* 5, no. 1 (2013).

37 References refer to Library of America volume version of this essay: *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*.

38 *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 946.

39 *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs and Other Writings*, 947.

of the ideals of democracy. Her stance is never anti-American, nor does she call for political or economic revolution. The United States as a constitutional democracy can repeal unjust laws and remove itself from efforts to sustain colonialism.

While some of Hurston's contemporaries turned to communism, and still more worked within mainstream civil rights organizations to challenge and address the nation's shortcomings, Hurston did neither. In fact, she instead turned further to the right, as is evident in two essays, "I Saw Negro Votes Peddled" (1950) and "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism" (1951), both of which were published in the *American Legion Magazine*.

During a period when black southerners and their allies would begin the struggle against their disenfranchisement, Hurston claims to have witnessed Florida blacks who had the vote and sold it. Her evidence is that they voted a straight ticket, and her historical grounding is based on a misreading of Reconstruction, when, she claims the Negro vote was herded by "greedy Carpet-baggers and their allies, the opportunist-minded southerner who came to be known as the Scalawag."<sup>40</sup> Again, here she adheres to the Dunning School.

In Florida, Hurston witnessed the CIO's effort to organize and register black voters and "heard about the payment of a dollar to each prospective voter." While she interviews a black schoolteacher who affirms that a northern organization has helped to register voters, Hurston asserts, without providing evidence, that the organization pays voters as well. This effort, according to Hurston, resulted in "the long delayed capture of the South by the left-wing."<sup>41</sup> Those voters who could not be bought with cash, Hurston claims, were convinced by promises of what the FEPC would do for them. (The Fair Employment Practice Committee was created in 1941 by President Roosevelt to implement executive order 8802, which banned discrimination in the war industry.) Finally, a class of impoverished voters was given groceries and "free things." Hurston portrays black voters as wanting something for nothing, as selling their birthright for a mess of pottage, yet she has no evidence other than people voting for those who sought their vote and who made campaign promises that might alleviate some of their suffering and eliminate the barriers to their progress. For Hurston "the exercise of the franchise, the most potent, the most sacred thing that man had conceived and strived for since humans began to live in communities, was counted as practically nothing."<sup>42</sup> Blacks ought to hold the right to vote in higher regard than other citizens do, because of the difficulties they encountered in acquiring it. But black voters, conditioned by Reconstruction politics to be led by exploitive "friends of the Negro," do not carefully consider the issues and vote accordingly; instead they sell their votes for empty promises or \$2.00. Hurston's article fed into the notion that black Floridians were not prepared for the responsibility of the vote and therefore

40 Zora Neale Hurston, "I Saw Negro Votes Peddled," *Journal of Transnational Studies* 5, no.1: 3.

41 Hurston, "I Saw Negro Votes Peddled," 5.

42 Hurston, "I Saw Negro Votes Peddled," 6.

not prepared for full citizenship rights. Mislead by “race leaders” and “friends of the Negro,” they voted against their own interests and the interests of the nation.

In June 1951, almost a year into Senator McCarthy’s Red Scare, Hurston published “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism.” The article’s pull quote reads, “Despite the high-pressure selling of the Paul Robesons, the Benjamin Davis’s and the Howard Fast, the American Negro is too smart to fall for Joe Stalin’s brand of up-to-date slavery.”<sup>43</sup> Although the article proposes to be about why blacks reject organized communism, it is also a public rebuke of black figures most closely aligned with left-wing causes. The article is accompanied by a drawing of an interracial protest with signs “Sign Up for Peace!” “No U.S. Imperialism,” “Get Out of Korea!” The article insists upon the exceptionalism of the American Negro, who will refuse the Communist Party’s efforts to “lump the American Negro in with all the other colored people of the world so that we will feel that if we fight against the North Koreans, or Mao’s hordes, we will be acting against our own best interest.”<sup>44</sup> Hurston names black artists and activists who she believed had been seduced by communism twenty-five years earlier during a trip to Russia. Many of these people were former friends and acquaintances, including Louise Thompson and Langston Hughes. The article is accompanied by a box with photos of Paul Robeson, Benjamin Davis, Du Bois, Howard Fast, and Langston Hughes, all former colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. Hurston insists that her resistance to Soviet Communism is because of USSR’s imperialists aim to “be masters of Asia.” Its interest in the American Negro is to use him as a pawn, propaganda, and ultimately soldier for these larger imperialist projects. For this reason Hurston believes communists “looked down upon us and despised us. They discounted our abilities and integrity infinitely more than those southerners from who they were pretending to defend us.”<sup>45</sup> Communism won’t work in America, according to Hurston, because there is no grinding poverty; poor and working-class people have access to economic mobility, and there is no “permanent bottom class.” Even the Negro “is the most class-conscious individual in the United States.”<sup>46</sup> He, like all Americans, would say, “Why kill the boss? He might be the big boss himself next year.” If members of the Democratic Party bribed black voters with promises of “free things,” then, according to Hurston, the Communist Party tried to bribe them with sexual access to white women. Both are the proverbial “white mares” said to distract and lure “black mules.”

But Hurston, elsewhere the antiracist and anticolonialist, here asserts the impossibility of an Afro-Asiatic coalition if it is to depend upon the participation of American Negroes. American blacks feel no bond with Koreans and Chinese: “When numerous Negro homes are mourning the death of their sons, husbands

43 Hurston, “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism,” 4.

44 Hurston, “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism,” 4.

45 Hurston, “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism,” 5.

46 Hurston, “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism,” 6.



and brothers, and boiling over with rage at the knowledge of butchery and inhuman torture of their loved ones at the hands of these same yellow skins, to now be exhorted to treasure them and take their sides with them is too much to expect of us, even though we are supposed not to be able to remember nor feel resentment at a thing like that.”<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, Hurston never acknowledges that black Americans might mourn deaths lost at the hands of lynch mobs or brutalities at the end of police batons. According to Hurston the party “has been led astray by the illusion of color. It has been tested and proved that we feel closer to the American white man than to any foreign Negro. The differences between us and foreigners are deep and fundamental.”<sup>48</sup> Negroes are Americans first, foremost, and always.

Even if Hurston is correct in her insistence that American blacks are first and foremost American and also anticommunist, which is likely, her insistence on castigating former colleagues and friends is quite troubling. There is nothing in her assertion of her political beliefs that requires such a public dismissal and critique of Du Bois, Robeson, and Hughes. In fact, the most consistent element of Hurston’s political thought appears to be her anti-Du Bois stances on understandings of culture, politics, and history. Her discussion of Negro spirituals in “Characteristics of Negro Expression” does not cite Du Bois by name, but she is clearly critical of the influential chapter “The Sorrow Songs” with which he closes *The Souls of Black Folk*. Carla Kaplan, editor of the indispensable *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, gives the most succinct description of Hurston’s ongoing critique of Du Bois:

She battled constantly with W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, and called him Dr. “Dubious”: “a propagandist” and “utterly detestable . . . [a] goateed, egotistic, wishy-washy . . . haughty aristocrat.” She considered him a mere dabbler in the arts, locked horns with him over the “Florida Negro” project of the Federal Writers’ Project, was happy to replace his encyclopedia entry on Negroes because she felt he was “the most pleadingest of all the special pleaders . . . [a] man . . . so subjective that he cannot utter a straight sentence,” and was enraged when she was misquoted as saying that “DuBois was the greatest or I do not think so.”<sup>49</sup>

The final essay of interest to an understanding of Hurston’s political thought is her well-known rejection of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, “Court Order Can’t Make Races Mix,” published in the *Orlando Sentinel* in 1955. While most readers note Hurston’s rejection of the decision because of its claim that black schools are inherently inferior and that allowing proximity to whites is an act of justice, Hurston finds the claim insulting. “I regard the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court as insulting rather than honoring my race. Since the days of the

47 Hurston, “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism,” 7.

48 Hurston, “Why the Negro Won’t Buy Communism,” 10.

49 Hurston to Katherine Tracy L’Engle, October 24, 1945, and Hurston to Langston Hughes, May 31, 1929, in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, 17.

never-to-be-sufficiently-deplored Reconstruction, there has been current the belief that there is no greater delight to Negroes than the physical association with whites. The doctrine of the white mare."<sup>50</sup>

However, few have noted a second major concern of the essay. According to Hurston the court's action constitutes government "by fiat," "by Decree": "But the South had better beware in another direction. While it is being frantic over the segregation ruling, it had better keep its eyes open for more important things. One instance of Gov't by fiat has been rammed down its throat. It is possible that the end of segregation is not here and never meant to be here at present, but the attention of the South directed on what was calculated to keep us busy while more ominous things were brought to pass."<sup>51</sup> She warns, "What if it is contemplated to do away with the two party system and arrive at Govt by administrative decree? No questions allowed and no information given out from the administrative department? We could get more rulings on the same subject and more far-reaching any day." For Hurston the real threat of the *Brown* decision isn't the blow it strikes to racial pride but the threat of government overreach. "Govt by fiat can replace the constitution." For Hurston, the New Deal was only the most recent example of government overreach: "the stubborn South and the Midwest kept this nation from being dragged farther to the left than it was during the New Deal."<sup>52</sup> This is an odd statement from a black American intellectual for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the South's overwhelming support for New Deal programs once black workers were denied access to some of them. Her distaste for the *Brown* decision is only partially because of her belief in black excellence. More importantly, it is based in a right-wing call for the removal of government from what is viewed as social engineering. This is the Hurston that contemporary libertarians find appealing.

Hurston's politics requires she disregard the suffering of black people, that she fundamentally ignore the antiblack racism that sits at the core of the nation, and that she ignore the entrenched nature of white supremacy. Unlike some contemporary black conservatives, Hurston is never antiblack. She celebrates the complexity, sophistication, and beauty of black aesthetics and the extraordinary wit, style, and grace with which ordinary black people conduct their daily lives. In Hurston's view slavery and racial oppression have not thwarted black people's aspiration toward the full achievement of their potential. However, her belief in black resilience and excellence often blinds her to the more ingrained elements of white supremacy and their efficacy at halting black social and political progress.

50 "Court Order Can't Make Races Mix," in *Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*.

51 "Court Order Can't Make Races Mix," 957.

52 "Court Order Can't Make Races Mix," 957.

## 14: George S. Schuyler

### Post-Souls Satirist

Jeffrey B. Ferguson

George S. Schuyler began his career in the early 1920s, at a time of increasing racism but also as the idea of race encountered its first strong intellectual challenge as a legitimate biological concept.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of more than fifty years, he devoted himself as a journalist, novelist, and cultural figure to killing it altogether. In addition to advocating open intellectual, cultural, social, and biological mixture of the races, Schuyler fashioned a satirical style that featured racial transgression as an inherent aspect of intellectual practice. In this we might regard him as something of a contemporary. His social and cultural ideal, which conflicted in every way with the sentimental dreams of those who desired harmony at the table of interracial brotherhood, involved a conflictual and sometimes violent process of interchange between individuals, groups, and the ideas that they represented. In the process of advancing his turbulent and in many ways contradictory alternative solution to the “Negro Problem,” Schuyler criticized, cajoled, and dismissed almost everyone of note—white and black, conservative and radical, racist and antiracist—who had anything of significance to say about the race question. Mainly he did this for the black audience of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, whose assumptions about race he challenged, almost always with a laugh, for four decades. In his most becoming guise, Schuyler symbolizes this diversity even as he challenges the liberal values that stand behind the celebration of diversity for its own sake.

In a 1933 letter to satirist and *American Mercury* editor H. L. Mencken, for whom Schuyler wrote several important articles in the 1920s and 1930s, African American writer Melvin Tolson offered only great praise. Declaring Schuyler not only a

<sup>1</sup> Editors’ note: Jeffrey B. Ferguson agreed at the outset of this project to produce the chapter on George S. Schuyler. He presented a draft of it at the annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association in Las Vegas, Nevada, in April 2015. Due to a battle with terminal cancer, he never got the chance to revise the draft. He died on March 11, 2018, at the age of fifty-three. Several months before he died, he gave the volume editors permission to edit the April 2015 draft so that it fit the volume. We have edited it conservatively—mainly correcting typos—with one exception: we removed a seven-manuscript-page segment on the state of black satire in the mid-2010s. We removed this segment both because it was tangential to the main subject of the chapter and because it was already outdated. Professor Ferguson had agreed in principle to shorten, if not eliminate, this segment, for the reasons we cite. He never got to edit the segment himself, so we have removed it for him. We have the excised segment on file, as part of the original 2015 draft, should scholars wish to see it.

notable writer but a remarkable person as well, Tolson described him as one of the most “civilized” personalities on the American scene. “He stimulates more differences of opinion than any other Negro writer,” Tolson observed. “His column ‘Views and Reviews’ . . . is the most discussed column in Negro America.” Tolson claimed to have heard Schuyler’s opinions “attacked and defended in barber-shops, Jim Crow cars, pool rooms, class rooms, churches, and drawing rooms.” Further supporting his characterization of Schuyler as a sophisticated personality and outstanding provocateur, Tolson praised the columnist for inspiring criticisms ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous and for enjoying with particular relish the most adverse statements of his detractors. “One evening in his apartment on Sugar Hill,” Tolson revealed, “he showed me a scrapbook full of them, and I had many a hearty laugh myself.” Again emphasizing Schuyler’s popularity, Tolson wondered what would happen if the editor could deliver his own funeral sermon. He speculated playfully that the event would solve the railroad depression because “Aframerica” would send hundreds of thousands.<sup>2</sup> They would come for a multitude of reasons, Tolson imagined, but all would enjoy themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Had Tolson, a dedicated left activist, written this assessment twenty years later, he could have offered Schuyler similar praise for his role as a cultural provocateur, but through the 1940s and 1950s the former member of A. Phillip Randolph’s socialist *Messenger* group had become a dedicated anticommunist and leading critic of the civil rights movement, one who would denounce both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Although Schuyler had ceased to pen formal satire by this time, the satirical mode remains recognizable, for example, in his reference to King as a “sable typhoid Mary” or his characterization of Malcolm X as ignorant for being surprised at seeing white Muslims in Mecca. This version of Schuyler, ugly to many of those who honor the accomplishments of the civil rights movement, has done little to help his subsequent reputation. Nevertheless, the atmosphere for Schuyler’s reception has improved markedly over the course of the post-civil rights era, especially since the 1990s, as the values of African Americans shift away from those that served the twentieth-century need to survive segregation and to bring mass pressure of various sorts to bear on the race problem. Increasingly black Americans are emphasizing their diversity, their multiple identities, and have begun to reject the thicker ideas of group solidarity that pertained during the days of segregation and protest. Along with this, many of them have begun to question more loudly and systematically the limitations and pressures that black Americans place on each other of the “black people don’t do this or that!” variety,

2 The term “Aframerican” was originally coined by James Weldon Johnson. Instead of using race as the defining category, “Aframerican” employs geography, pointing to black people’s origin in Africa and their continuing existence in America as a mixed race. Although Johnson coined the term and Tolson employed it, Schuyler probably put it to the most extensive use of any writer in the period.

3 Melvin B. Tolson, “George S. Schuyler,” *American Mercury* 28 (1933): 373–74.

preferring instead to promote an ideal of black multiplicity. In other words, they approach a formula similar to Schuyler's own, especially during the first half of his career, which this chapter will focus on for the sake of brevity.

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The longevity of Schuyler's career, his importance as a black journalist, the range of his output, and the uniqueness of his perspective qualify him easily for the attention of anyone in any era interested in the racial history of the United States, but today we have special reasons to be interested in Schuyler because we live amidst the greatest outpouring of African American satire in the history of American race relations. Race satire has achieved such prominence in part because laughter, invective, corrosive irony, symbolic violence, and other features of the satirical mode have become more central to American expression in general since the end of the civil rights movement. In his own day Schuyler made similar satirical statements about the way black Americans related to their leaders, and to themselves, but he was, as a matter of style, much more inclined to hit with fists than with slaps. In one of his best editorials of the 1920s, he provides a very good introduction not only to his wide range of commentary in this era but also to his manner in responding to readers: "Personally, I am only interested in getting our folks thinking all around the problems confronting them rather than following blindly our two-by-four leaders. Get people to thinking and they will work out their own salvation."<sup>4</sup> This was his answer in 1926 to readers who wanted more from him than the satirical name-calling and negative critique that had, up until that time, made his reputation. Recognizing Schuyler's status as a leading voice in the black press, and secretly hoping that he might open himself up for ridicule, his readers wanted to hear him express his solution to the "Negro Problem" directly and fully in programmatic form. Detecting the hook in the bait, Schuyler chided his readers for their slavish desire for big answers from big men. In the process, he challenged the whole idea of a "Negro Problem" and questioned the adequacy of problem/solution thinking in approaching issues of social justice. Mocking his readers' expectation of a definite program for the Negro, he offered them instead a list of ten "suggestions," in a form reminiscent of the Ten Commandments, for what people who find themselves incapable of independent thought should do in the coming year.

Before reviewing Schuyler's list, it is important to recognize the author's general attitude toward the question it purports to answer, because it is the history of that question, and its framing in the American public discourse of the 1920s, that he wanted to challenge. At the turn of the twentieth century the debate surrounding the New South was the most common frame of reference for the rhetoric of problems and solutions for the Negro. Within this discourse, the "Negro Problem"

4 George S. Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 16, 1926.

was something for white men to solve. Understood this way, as a problem of white southern adjustment, the “Negro Problem” inspired many solutions ranging from extermination to expatriation to separation.<sup>5</sup> Strangely enough, it required a black leader, Booker T. Washington, to propose the most popular “solution” to the dilemma of the white South. Through his industrial education scheme, so slyly articulated in the “Atlanta Exposition Address” of 1895, Washington assured whites that blacks would remain economically useful and politically docile, that they would provide the backbone of a mobile and modernistic New South while reminding whites in every possible way of the comforts of the past.<sup>6</sup>

In response to Washington’s accommodating solution to the “Negro Problem,” and in opposition to those who thought of the Negro as a white man’s problem, W. E. B. Du Bois explained to his readers in *The Souls of Black Folk* just what it felt like to “be a problem.” In doing so, he claimed the Negro question as black intellectual property. Although he did not hesitate to point out how whites suffered morally and spiritually from the American racial divide, Du Bois placed his greatest emphasis on the problem of black “double consciousness,” a condition of the heart and mind stemming from the duality of black and American identity under conditions of segregation and racial oppression.

To the doubleness permeating every aspect of black existence, Du Bois offered a double solution. On one side he advocated radical protest aimed at breaking down the social, political, economic, and cultural barriers between the races.<sup>7</sup> On the other, he supported a program of cultural recovery rooted in the intellectual exploration of such profound creations of the black inner world as the “Sorrow Songs,” which he regarded as uniquely black and uniquely American at the same time. Beyond this, the “Sorrow Songs” represented for Du Bois the fruits of black American “second-sight,” a keen perception of the fundamental tragedy of existence derived from the bitter lessons of slavery and its aftermath.<sup>8</sup> Du Bois hoped that these two “solutions,” protest and cultural recovery, would prove mutually reinforcing. He wanted the recognition of black beauty in tragedy to inspire the sense of dignity required to continue the political struggle against racism. At the same time, he hoped that the pride derived from actively fighting oppression could deepen the desire to recover profundity from the most unlikely sources.<sup>9</sup>

In one sense, we might derive Schuyler’s ironic approach to the “Negro Prob-

5 Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 216, 291–92.

6 Booker T. Washington, “The Atlanta Exposition Address,” in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan, Stuart B. Kaufman, and Raymond W. Smock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 5:583–87.

7 This is most prominent as a theme in the third chapter, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 392–404.

8 See “Of the Sorrow Songs,” in Du Bois, *Souls*, 536–46. For “second-sight,” Du Bois, *Souls*, 364.

9 Du Bois, *Souls*, 424–38.

lem" from Du Bois, who served as a seminal influence for most black thinkers of the 1920s. As he shows clearly in challenging his readers to "think all around the problems facing them," Schuyler followed Du Bois in placing a heavy emphasis on black people's addressing the chaos in their own minds at the same time that he encouraged a radical posture toward white racism. Schuyler also joined Du Bois in viewing the "Negro Problem" ironically. Yet where Du Bois invoked the passion and pain of tragedy to characterize the American race complex, Schuyler employed the disfiguring energies of satire. Where Du Bois found inspiration and wisdom in such moving black cultural creations as the Sorrow Songs, Schuyler invoked the tradition of black humor, whose wisdom resided in its sharp recognition of the ludicrous and outlandish in American race relations. He directly dismissed Du Bois's idea of African American cultural unity, holding instead that blacks participated in the same American culture as whites, and that race in this case captured nothing deeper than skin color, and it did not even account for that very well. As a humorist and a satirist, Schuyler also implicitly challenged Du Bois's high-toned and sentimental register of feeling. For him, the "Negro Problem" required a rougher treatment more appropriate to its origin in the raw willingness of one group to dominate another and the necessity that the oppressed view the oppressor with cold realism.

In submitting the "Negro Problem" to satirical humor, Schuyler challenged Du Bois's approach in at least one other way. By not trying to solve the "Negro Problem" for his readers, he implicitly rejected the idea of the black intellectual as someone who should stand above the black masses as a race expert. Instead Schuyler conceived of the black intellectual as an agent provocateur. Although he shared with Du Bois the desire for a black intellectual class, he exchanged the elitist notion of a middle-class "Talented Tenth" for a wider distribution of intellectual values among all classes of blacks. While Du Bois wanted the "Talented Tenth" to move the race forward by embracing a benevolent and altruistic ethic of service, Schuyler wanted intellectually motivated and practically informed black individuals of all classes to move themselves forward first and to serve the race when it made rational sense.

In taking this angle on the issues facing black Americans in the 1920s, Schuyler had many race experts in mind besides Du Bois. Kelly Miller, Marcus Garvey, Eugene Kinkle Jones, Robert Russa Moton, and many other black public figures joined a long list of white race experts in the 1920s in placing their solutions to the "Negro Problem" before expectant audiences. This made Schuyler wonder whether the great rush to provide answers did not itself reinforce the problem. In his view, the very expectation of a single large answer to the race question brought with it a totalizing assumption of basic differences between the races. The fantasy that such an answer would require deep social analysis by a penetrating intellect or a great political genius seemed to him no less rooted in this belief. Because of this, he found the tendency to celebrate such figures suspicious at best.

Against the expectation that a great man or woman would come along and provide a final solution to the race question, Schuyler insisted that the “Negro Problem” did not exist at all. Instead there were only Negroes who had problems which were themselves complexly intertwined with issues of class, international politics, and region. Any worthwhile form of black political unity would have to come out of a sophisticated public discussion of these issues. Schuyler did everything he could to keep this discussion going on a broad basis. Provocation and biting humor were his best weapons in achieving this end. His refusal to answer important questions, especially false questions, flowed directly from the use of these rhetorical methods.

Now, with Schuyler’s objections to the question set before him by his readers established, let us turn to his “Ten Commandments” of 1926, keeping in mind that the very form of his response to the request that he offer a “program for the Negro” ridicules the person who would put him in the position of playing God and Moses at the same time:

- 1 Support Negro business and spend as much as you can with them—and do it because they are Negro businesses. White businesses employ white clerks and skilled help because they are white.
- 2 Help to promote, organize and support new Negro enterprises based on sound business principles. Assume that all the officers handling money are likely to “Go South” with the funds; so have them bonded, and let the security company worry.
- 3 Help to lower the Negro death rate by spreading the Gospel of sanitation, hygiene and early medical attention, especially in regard to venereal diseases, the greatest menace to Negro health.
- 4 Buy at least one piece of ground in 1926—preferably in the North, East or West—even if it is only half an acre in the suburbs of your town; but don’t buy “a pig in a sack”—see what you are getting.
- 5 Join a labor union and bargain collectively for wages, conditions of work and hours of labor. If you cannot join a white union, form a Negro union; but belong to some union. This goes for so-called professional workers as well as the bozo swinging a pick. If you must ape the white man, ape some of his virtues occasionally.
- 6 Don’t ask more or less of the Negro business man than you actually do of the white merchants you have been trading with. Negro businesses should concentrate on service, cleanliness, modernity and neatness, and attempt to excel their white competitors in these things.
- 7 Stop dealing in faith and face the facts. This is the age of materialism, not mysticism. Practice enlightened self-interest and develop intelligent skepticism. Examine all sides of every question. Be “from Missouri.”
- 8 Spend more time and money on the inside of your head than on the outside.



- 9 Give less time, energy and money to getting ready to die, and more to the business of living.
- 10 Read Frederick [sic] Nietzsche, Max Stirner, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Anatole France, Thomas Paine, Thoreau, Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Boccaccio, Balzac, Rabelais, Zola, Flaubert, Havelock Ellis, Swift, Mark Twain, and Samuel Butler. Use your public library for a change. Get some real culture. You can be relieved of your money but not of your culture.<sup>10</sup>

Looking at Schuyler's "Ten Commandments" as a whole, one finds elements from almost all of the major political positions being debated at the time in the black press. Schuyler combined the Bookerite business boosterism of the National Negro Business League with the unionism of A. Phillip Randolph's *Messenger* group. He joins a vaguely nationalistic call for group loyalty with an encouragement to experimentalist and individualist skepticism. Despite his willingness at times to criticize and sometimes even to lampoon individual positions, Schuyler recognized that all of the major "solutions" proposed by black leaders—whether Tuskegee-style accommodationist conservatism, Urban League bureaucratic liberalism, NAACP legalism, *Messenger* group socialism, or Garveyite nationalism—had some merit. They each provided essential ideological and practical tools for every black person's toolbox. He insisted that the effectiveness of these tools depended ultimately on individual imagination creatively engaged within concrete historical situations.

The general similarity between Schuyler's position in the "Ten Commandments" and philosophical pragmatism seems clear. In *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, literary historian George Hutchinson argues that pragmatism, along with the cultural anthropology of anthropologist Franz Boas and cultural pluralism, constituted an important element in the intellectual matrix connecting black and white thinkers in the 1920s.<sup>11</sup> Rather than existing in a realm apart, or somehow preceding experience, truth for pragmatists arises from an interaction between self and world. Because they conceive of truths as results of human action, pragmatists judge them by their consequences. Instead of seeing truth as the end of a quest for the real, they think of it as a human invention deeply implicated in the kind of world it helps to create.<sup>12</sup> In asking his audience to "think," Schuyler has something like this in mind. He wants his readers to trust their own experiences rather than depending on the word of authority. Moreover, he wants them

10 "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 16, 1926.

11 George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap / Harvard University Press, 1995), 33–61.

12 Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 33–61. See: Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xiii–xlviii, and Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

to engage their problems experimentally and, one might even say, artistically, not simply to solve individual problems but to reinvent American democracy.

Stated this way, Schuyler's mission might appear pragmatic without seeming all that practical. One could question whether any of his ten suggestions, taken individually, would really help to alleviate any black social, political, or economic problem of the 1920s. How many blacks in Schuyler's audience really had the money to purchase a piece of land in 1926? How many had the time or the requisite skills to visit the library or to make the tiniest dent in Schuyler's formidable reading list? Such practical objections to Schuyler's specific ideas are easy to generate, because most of his suggestions reflect a certain jaunty optimism about the power of rationality, materialism, and cosmopolitanism to counterbalance the heavy weight of segregation, poverty, cruelty, and self-doubt. But for black Americans in the 1920s, a certain enthusiasm for the future of the race matched the historical moment.

Schuyler generally agreed with most New Negroes of the 1920s that the movement of 1.2 million blacks to such northern urban centers as Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and New York presented new possibilities for positive change. Like Alain Locke and many others, he recognized in this demographic shift unprecedented potential not only for economic and political progress but for spiritual change as well.<sup>13</sup> In his famous introduction to *The New Negro* (1925), Alain Locke argued that the new urban locus of black American life had set the submissive, politically unconscious, and culturally retrograde Negro of the past on the road to extinction. In his place there appeared a more confident, assertive, and self-aware Negro who stood ready to make a distinctive contribution to the complex ethnic diversity of American culture.

Nevertheless, Schuyler's agreement with his peers in this matter only provided a backdrop for many disagreements. His version of the New Negro—at once an ironist, a socialist, a pragmatist, a humorist, a sexual liberal, an insistent antiracist, and a dedicated antiromantic—required above all else controversy and opposition. One of the most interesting features of Schuyler's 1920s editorials was the drama surrounding his battles with those who entertained other notions concerning what the modern black person should be. At different points he debated and derided Du Bois, Garvey, Moton, and Miller. He also fought with lesser-known editors and leaders such as Gordon Hancock of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, Fred R. Moore of the *New York Age*, and Robert Abbot of the *Chicago Defender*. The way Schuyler performed in these debates made some of his readers think of him as a potential "leader of the race"; but as noted earlier, he rejected such titles, preferring to retain his independence, and with that his ability to portray himself as a maverick, a voice in the wilderness advocating a cause all but lost.

13 Alain Locke, introduction to *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 6.

What is a New Negro? What moral dilemmas must he reconcile? How does he act in the face of new challenges and new ideas? As one can tell from Schuyler's responses to readers requesting a solution to the "Negro Problem," he answered these questions by setting an example of skepticism, rationality, realism, and critical thinking rather than offering blueprints or "two-by-four" schemes. Much more than a space where the author presented his favorite ideas, Schuyler's articles and editorials together constituted a site where the author invented himself as a character in the realm of public discourse. Following the fate of this character as he took on established race leaders, political figures, and the major thinkers of his time—observing him as he ventured to England, the ancestral home of the Anglo-Saxon, or as he rode the Jim Crow car through the racist South—provided a drama that transcended both the theoretical and the programmatic implications of his individual utterances. To read the thoughts of this individual from week to week, to witness him encountering new situations and new intellectual challenges provided for a black audience itself only recently introduced in large numbers to the world of industry, mass communications, and skyscrapers, was one way to measure the possibilities of a new world.

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Broad historical comparisons most often go awry, but it still makes sense to acknowledge some important similarities between the 1920s, when Schuyler came of age as a satirist, and our own: expanded media, consumerism, a new mass culture, automotivity, a diminished Left, a large and widening gap in wealth, politics dominated by money, exhaustion with politics, widespread fear of a potentially destructive foreign enemy, and a large political split between urban and agrarian values that mirrors in some ways our own red-blue political divide represent only a few of the important parallels. In the 1920s, producer values of the nineteenth century were giving way palpably to an increasing emphasis on bodily comfort, immediate happiness, and the accrual of money. In some ways the stereotyped idea of the 1920s as a permanent party featuring blues and jazz music, illegal liquor, and liberated sexual values recognizes these changes in the form of nostalgia, but the trends of this era generally resist sentimental and romantic moods. The First World War, which left the United States by default as the most powerful nation in the world, also demonstrated beyond a doubt that modernity had very little to do with progress; in fact, it resembled more a kind of high-tech barbarism. A rebellion against Victorian values had begun before the war, but blood-soaked soil in the supposedly most advanced, and whitest, part of the world rendered ridiculous the idea that mere moral appeal could possibly stand up to the impersonal and destructive forces, both material and emotional, that really controlled the world. The tough, not the tender-minded, will inherit the earth, it was increasingly thought.

Among its many effects, this new mood gave satire a central place in the culture, as a whole generation of talented writers, many with backgrounds in journalism such as Ring Lardner, Dorothy Parker, Nathanael West, James Thurber, Sinclair Lewis, and H. L. Mencken, began to stalk American society for targets that could serve their general assault on provincialism, moralism, sentimentalism, and cultural narrowness. These included the philistinism of the industrial bourgeoisie, the provincialism of small-town America, the greed of money-hungry politicians, the vapidness of popular culture, the blindness of unreflective patriotism, the tyrannical excesses of the reform impulse, the childlike ignorance of popular myth, the confusion of sexual relations, and the narrow pettiness of fundamentalist crusaders. This long list could be even longer because the debunkers devoted themselves to full-scale rhetorical terrorism against almost everything that the average American of their era held dear.<sup>14</sup>

When muckraking lost its ability to shock audiences in the years around 1910, those who wished to carry on the spirit of this influential style of journalism shifted to a more entertaining modality. They rejected the moral tone of late nineteenth-century styles of muckraking for a morally ambiguous, ironic, and comic mode of presentation. They also abandoned the economic and social issues that had dominated the writings of their predecessors for an almost exclusively cultural critique. Because most of them either received their initial training with newspapers or continued as journalists throughout their career, the cultural muckrakers of the period between the world wars brought a hardboiled and realistic spirit to even their most highbrow literary efforts.<sup>15</sup>

Because of these trends, and given the general popularity of satire in the 1920s, we might well wonder why many more black writers besides Schuyler did not choose to devote themselves to it. The general idea of the New Negro—militant, modernistic, skeptical, audacious, worldly-wise, and aggressive—would seem to overdetermine the adoption of an assertive and aggressive ironic mode. Some black writers of the 1920s did try their hand at satire. Walter White, Theophilus Lewis, Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, J. A. Rogers, Eugene Gordon, Robert Bagnall, and many others occasionally dipped their pens in acid, but none, except perhaps Thurman and Lewis, brought to their efforts the combination of humor and aggression that Schuyler would routinely apply to his various targets. Also, no black writer of the Harlem Renaissance employed satire to address anywhere near the range of issues that Schuyler treated in his editorials, magazine articles, and stories, and in his novel *Black No More* (1931).

Among the debunkers, H. L. Mencken stood tall as the undeniable king. In part this was a matter of sheer talent, but it also stemmed from his editorship of two powerful journals, the *Smart Set* and the *American Mercury*, where he not only

<sup>14</sup> Edward A. Martin, *H. L. Mencken and the Debunkers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Martin, *H. L. Mencken*, 26–29.

expressed his own point of view but also published many other writers that he regarded as truly civilized personalities, including Schuyler, whom he published nine times between 1927 and World War II. In addition to Schuyler, Mencken published James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, Theophilus Lewis, J. A. Rogers, Wallace Thurman, and several other figures of the Harlem Renaissance. As a matter of principle and intellectual interest, the “Sage of Baltimore” made a special effort to ensure that the black point of view had a place in his journal. In this way he influenced the direction of the Harlem Renaissance as he did the whole orientation of American arts and letters in his time—and his biggest role in the Renaissance involved the inspiration and direction that he gave to Schuyler. Mencken carried on a correspondence with Schuyler and invited him several times over the years to his house in Baltimore. From the time Schuyler published “Our White Folks,” his first *Mercury* essay, in 1927 until Mencken’s death in 1956, the two men carried on a distant but lasting friendship. Among his readers Schuyler came to be known as “the black Mencken,” mostly to denounce him as the mere imitator of a white man. As it turns out, this somewhat mean and inaccurate accusation comes with some truth, because many of Schuyler’s positions can be derived from those of Mencken, even some that seem to imply race pride or black nationalist leanings. But Schuyler did not get his socialism from “the Sage,” nor did he share Mencken’s cultural pluralism. Schuyler believed more in a common American culture than Mencken did, and he embraced some of Mencken’s ideas about race for their convenience in turning the tables on his own targets. In order to see this, we need to know a bit more about Mencken’s intellectual position, especially regarding the question of black and white.

Of the important concepts at work in Mencken’s worldview such as civilization, cosmopolitanism, realism, and irony, none surpassed race as a recurrent focal point. Through the years, race, along with the related issues of tradition and cultural inheritance, remained central categories in his battle against the narrow elite of New England-bred Anglo-Saxon critics, such as Stuart Sherman and Paul Elmer More, who ruled the cultural scene during his youth. Using mimicry, parody, and other weapons of the satirist, Mencken opposed this Victorian elite, which represented to him little more than an organized effort to deny everything vital and interesting about the United States. Rather than preach against the evils of such men—and they were all men—Mencken attacked their pretension to gentlemanly status. Claiming to represent the “civilized minority,” he lampooned his enemies as fakes who deserved the disdain that only the true man of culture can have for those who portray ignorance as wisdom.

Mencken not only employed this style in satirizing pseudo-aristocrats but also used it like a battering ram against a wide array of targets, including the Ku Klux Klan, political reformers, churchgoers, preachers, politicians, Prohibitionists, sexual prudes, and anyone he deemed a member of the vast crowd of conformists

who lacked the common decency to mind their own business. Such intolerant souls seemed to him out of step with the sensibility necessary to sustain the dynamic polyglot multiplicity of the United States. Against the narrowness of those who would have the entire nation march lockstep to their own values, Mencken promoted the ideal of the ruggedly independent and tough-minded individual with strong but cultivated prejudices. Yet in spite of the emphasis he placed on fairness and cultural openness, he remained eternally suspicious of democracy and complacent about inequality, sometimes to the point of blaming the victim.

As Richard Wright attests in *Black Boy* (1945), Mencken received his greatest recognition among blacks not so much for his pluralistic fairmindedness as for his blistering attack on the South, which he carried out most famously in "The Sahara of the Bozart."<sup>16</sup> In this unrelenting assault on southern values, Mencken characterizes the South as a cultural wasteland ruled by inferior men incapable of understanding the glories of southern aristocracy before the Civil War. In opposition to the self-serving racism of these southerners, Mencken offers his own racist explanation for their utter inferiority. In other words, he refuses to waste fine explanations on idiots. Instead he offers them something they can understand. Against the myth of white southern descent from the best strains of Anglo-Saxon blood, he claims that the Civil War wiped out all of the genetic superiors, leaving mostly descendants of the low-born Celts, with whom the Anglo-Saxons always refused to intermarry. Rather than sully themselves through sexual contact with repugnant Celts, the better strain of whites preferred the highest types among their slaves. This left the mixed breeds, the mulattoes, as the natural superiors of both their darker counterparts and the dirty whites of the southern majority.

For Mencken's black readers, especially the darker ones, embracing this vision of black superiority came at a cost. Certainly Mencken's attack on the South presented tempting possibilities, but fully accepting it required tacit assent to a romantic myth of the glorious old South and to the ultimate racial superiority of slaveholding Anglo-Saxons. Recognizing this, James Weldon Johnson offered an alternate explanation for southern intellectual deficiency. He speculated that not racial deficiency but the excessive energy the South put into maintaining segregation and Jim Crow explained its cultural failure. Mencken never responded directly to this suggestion.

"The Sahara of the Bozart" places an important question in front of anyone pondering the much-debated issue of Mencken's racism. It demonstrates well Mencken's preference for slippery irony in mocking racist frameworks through imitation rather than direct counterargument. Still, Mencken's willingness to give the racist some of his own medicine leaves room for doubters to wonder whether

<sup>16</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1945), 214–18.

he makes an entirely secure ally for the antiracist. Even those who understand Mencken's ironic methods and intentions have expressed doubts concerning just how much of the racist remained in the man behind the satirical mask. In his writings on racial and ethnic issues, Mencken commonly employed reductionist and Social Darwinist language in referring to minorities. He also employed a wide array of pejorative names for ethnic groups, referring to Jews as "kikes," Italians as "dagoes," and blacks as "nigaros," "sambos," or any other distasteful appellation that came to mind. This method of challenging the pretense involved in the whole idea of "respectable" names for groups, and the narrow-mindedness of those who enforce such linguistic codes, has always made racial progressives more than a bit uncomfortable with Mencken. Of course Mencken liked making such people feel uncomfortable, because he regarded their crusading reformism as a large part of the American problem.

Of the black intellectuals affected by Mencken, none employed the form and substance of his perspective with more enthusiasm and precision than Schuyler. Looking at Schuyler's journalism as a whole, there exists no editorial, no article, and hardly a sentence where Mencken's influence does not seem somehow evident. When Schuyler called Robert Russa Moton "Rusty Moton," or referred to Kelly Miller as the "Mouthematician of Howard," or labeled Marcus Garvey the "Imperial Blizzard," he seemed only the slightly darkened and distorted image of Mencken calling Warren Harding "the numskull of Gamaliel," or Woodrow Wilson "the archangel Woodrow," or Calvin Coolidge "a dreadful little cad."<sup>17</sup> Schuyler's habit of combining this kind of invective with exaggerations of polite, scientific, or archaic terminology mirrored Mencken's method of creating comic incongruity by placing formal modes of English next to the more informal and direct language of everyday Americans. Like Mencken, Schuyler heightened incongruity by employing outrageous exaggeration almost as if to say that no amount of overstatement could match the ridiculous reality that he endeavored to describe. Schuyler also repeated many of Mencken's coinages and pet phrases such as "booboisie," "buncombe," "of the first water," and referring to misguided foes as "brother."

Schuyler's criticisms of religion, morality, Prohibition, feminism, the South, and the corruption of the political system all demonstrate his debt to Mencken. One can also see Mencken's influence in Schuyler's ideas concerning the decadence of the white race and in his disdain for Britain, which informed his notion of the darker races of the world rising against white supremacy. Although the idea of the rise of the darker races has other sources among Schuyler's intellectual influences, including Garvey and Du Bois, it does reflect in part the effect of

<sup>17</sup> *The Diary of H. L. Mencken*, ed. Charles A. Fechner (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 160–61.

Mencken's polemic against the fake and decadent Anglo-Saxons of the United States and Britain. Schuyler's condemnation of the black inferiority complex bears a crucial relation to Mencken's criticism of the American inferiority complex. His promotion of black independence and his disdain for mendicancy and patronage reflect Mencken's emphasis on ethnic groups in America maintaining their way of life and their independence even in tough times. During the Depression, Schuyler's critical attitude toward Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal stemmed in part from Mencken's streak of antireformism and disdain for both the old Anglo leadership and the dirty whites of the South that had voted in a bloc for the Democrats since the days of slavery. All of this, in turn, contributed to Schuyler's shift to conservatism during the second half of his career. In addition to these more substantive contributions to Schuyler's outlook, Mencken provided Schuyler with a methodological clinic in the uses of satire for the outsider in American culture. Mencken showed that a clever critic could win the cultural upper hand without really arguing systematically against conventional standards. Using satirical tools, he could reverse them or reject them wholesale as the ridiculous creations of ridiculous men. He also showed that a vigorous journalist with a strong satirical pen could succeed in garnering a great deal of attention for a newspaper. Schuyler did not miss this lesson either.

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Along with ideas that he found in the writings of Lester Ward and of his close friend J. A. Rogers, Mencken's framework allowed Schuyler to do something different from engaging in protest rhetoric even as he encouraged rebellion on a massive scale. Because Mencken had already condemned the vast majority of whites in merciless terms, he cleared some cultural room for Schuyler not only to do the same but also to declare blacks superior and eager to meet whites in any sort of competition. Both Oswald Spengler, a German intellectual who famously announced the decline of the West just after World War I, and the professional Anglo-Saxons Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard, racist theorists who feared the rise of darker peoples due to their superior breeding ability, also contributed to this direction in Schuyler's thought.

Schuyler made sure not to let the survival doubts of racists go to waste. In "Our White Folks," his first article for the *American Mercury*, he criticizes whites for their supposed faddishness, their puritanism, their enthusiasm for psychoanalysis, and their habit of punishing the very people who give them the most joy, black Americans. Unable to live comfortably with their natural desire for pleasure, Schuyler says, whites project upon blacks the ambivalent but guilt-relieving image of a happy-go-lucky childlike fool that they both love and hate with pathetic ambivalent shallowness. It only makes matters worse, he says, that they turn to



charlatans like Billy Sunday, Madison Grant, and Imperial Wizard Evans to help them further enhance their fantasies.<sup>18</sup>

In "Our White Folks," Schuyler shows that all of the qualities commonly put forth as white virtues—a strong work ethic, deep moral concern, a preponderance of worldly power, and intellect—can with only a bit of exaggeration serve the case for white decadence just as well. The same goes for the negative qualities commonly attributed to blacks, which appear tremendously positive with only a slight shift in perspective. Thus the "lusty virile shine" garners praise for his ability to perceive discontinuous and deceptive realities in his own terms. Because this character could live directly and honestly without imposing fast-frozen ideals, especially moral ideals, on ever-shifting circumstance, Schuyler asserted that he would in good time displace the narrow and decadent white racist. He also believed that this resilient character would achieve his ends by any means necessary, employing love, sex, violence, and protest alternately. His biological advantages, which derived ironically from his African heritage, his hybrid vigor, and his environmental circumstances, would significantly aid this effort. Where whites allowed it, he would integrate. Where they made it necessary, he would gladly live with his own, build black institutions, and bide his time. Ever ready to adjust and overcome, this protean character would through trickery and stealth, through direct assault and strategic retreat, achieve his ends by exploiting every blind spot of white supremacy. An antithesis of perfectionism and a master of irony, he would win by capitalizing on contradiction.

In many of Schuyler's writings this thought, rooted in the celebration of ironic turnabout, took on the pitiless character of the most extreme racist writings of his day. War, genocide, race competition, and amalgamation all played their role in his reflections concerning why whites could not maintain their fictional racial integrity under the conditions presented by the Machine Age. In an article appearing in the February 1930 edition of the *American Mercury* called "A Negro Looks Ahead," where Schuyler attempts to shock his audience by proposing amalgamation as the most practical solution to the race problem, he summarizes some of the reasons for his ominous prognosis:

Breaches in the social barriers will become harder to repair with the softening of the Caucasians and the passing of the professional Anglo-Saxons, and will widen with the flow of ambitious blacks. The Aframerican, shrewd, calculating, diplomatic, patient and a master of Nordic psychology, steadily saps the foundation of white supremacy. Time, he knows, is with him. A few Caucasian alarmists cry shrilly, and ever and anon rally considerable forces to the defense. The Negro suffers a reverse, loses a position, but when the dust is settled he has the ball on the Nordic's five-yard line. He has learned one thing well: that the Caucasian is human before he is white,

<sup>18</sup> *Diary of H. L. Mencken*, 160–61.

and he orders his attack accordingly. Ten, twenty or forty years hence he may not be in possession of complete social equality and all that follows in its path, but he'll be nearer the goal. By 2000 AD. a full-blooded American Nordic may be as tanned naturally as they are now striving to become artificially.<sup>19</sup>

As we have already seen, Schuyler regarded the ability to adjust and adapt to the ironic realities of oppression as the most praiseworthy aspect of black American identity. He saw black Americans as a racially mixed and downtrodden caste—as opposed to a class or a race—whose struggle for rights and material prosperity represented one instance in the larger contest between human diversity and the closed values of inbreeding and rigid hierarchy represented by whiteness. By placing his evolutionary bet on blacks, Schuyler declared in characteristically bold terms his belief that entropy and dynamism would always defeat contrived order and pretense. Ultimately, he thought, the race question reduced to how long Nature would take to announce her inevitable verdict.

Although they reveal some of his enthusiasm for the game of turnabout with white supremacy, Schuyler's gentle comic reflections on white American decadence provide very little indication of his more punitive extremes. For this one must read his editorials on race and international politics. Among these, none contains more direct expression of anger than Schuyler's editorial on the decline of the British Empire, where he claims to be "tickled to death" over the humbling of "bigoted, arrogant color-phobic England."<sup>20</sup> Schuyler happily reports statistics documenting the precipitous increase of the insane population in Wales and England and delights in the prospect of British authorities passing a sterilization law in order to avoid building new asylums. In response, Schuyler rejoices that eugenics has come full circle: for the greater good of humanity, the mighty Anglo-Saxons have agreed to prevent their own increase. Delighting in the "chickens coming home to roost" character of the British predicament, he asserts that in order to dominate foreign peoples, the British ruling class had to cannibalize its own working class. With the blindness of Grant and Stoddard clearly in his mind's eye, Schuyler declares the degradation of the British to be the real legacy of the British Empire. Having employed economic analysis to arrive at the same basic conclusions as Stoddard, but with a different valuation, he celebrates white decadence and the rising tide of color:

The empire is disintegrating. The mother country is rotten from top to bottom because of poverty, vice and weakening of the old moral code. She is gradually passing out of world power. Another nice big war and she will be a gone gosling. The darker peoples should rejoice. An ancient enemy is falling. There is a lesson in this

19 Schuyler, "A Negro Looks Ahead," *American Mercury* 19 (1930): 220.

20 "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 20, 1928.

to us Negroes in America, for this country is on top of the heap, but it won't be long before she too will follow in the footsteps of Greece, Rome, Turkey, Spain and England. . . . As the single, intelligent, homogeneous group in this country our time of power is almost here as it is for the darker peoples everywhere.<sup>21</sup>

In another editorial Schuyler cheers for Chinese general Chiang Kai-Shek's advancing army in such enthusiastic terms that he seems suddenly transformed from a satirist into a cheerleader: "Bolshevism! cry the imperialist powers, but they dare not make too much of a show of force for fear of inflaming all China with its four hundred millions of people. Down with Imperialism! On with the Revolution! cry the victorious Cantonese."<sup>22</sup> Carrying these enthusiastic reflections on China forward, he reflects on the prospects for an African rebellion of similar proportions.

There is one more thing that I would like to see before the morticians start fussing over my remains, and that is the same thing happening in Africa. Just imagine all Africa seething with revolt and the missionaries . . . speeding down the Nile, the Niger and the Congo seeking the safety of foreign cruisers! That, my friends is not as far off as one might think. . . . Twenty years ago hardly anyone dreamed that China would in such a short period go anti-Christian, anti-imperialist and, what's more, Bolshevik! It makes a whole lot of difference when you get a few rifles, cannon, machine guns and such toys on your side.<sup>23</sup>

This kind of thinking stands at the root of Schuyler's enthusiasm in the mid-1930s for the Ethiopian War against invading Italy and for his fantasy stories such as *Black Empire* and *Black Internationale*, written in the same period, which tell a tale of African liberation through war, merciless use of science, and Machiavelian political manipulation.

In many of his editorials Schuyler spoke of armed conflict between the races in the international arena, but he also did not mind speculating on more peaceful ways for the tide of color to rise. In a 1929 editorial on the tanning craze, which he generally took as a tacit white admission of attraction to darkness, Schuyler explains why the Nordic blond places himself at a distinct evolutionary disadvantage whenever he ventures below the 45th Parallel. Following the theories of Charles Woodruff and other investigators into the effects of sunlight on the white race, Schuyler claims that the white man's constitution disagrees violently with tropical conditions.<sup>24</sup> Woodruff, who feared the immigration of "swarthy" Eastern and southern Europeans to the United States, explains in *The Effects of Tropical Light*

21 "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 20, 1928.

22 "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 26, 1927.

23 "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 9, 1927.

24 "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 25, 1929.

on *White Men* (1905) that light skin allows the most harmful wavelengths of light to penetrate the body, causing debilitating harm to the nervous system and the internal organs. Therefore, in geographic regions below the 45th Parallel, darker types always appear healthier, reproduce better, and live longer.<sup>25</sup> Proving once again his willingness employ any theory that allows him to turn the tables on the promoters of racial purity, Schuyler uses Woodruff's to predict colored dominion over most of the globe, including the United States. He claims that the Italians, Arabs, and Spanish acquired dark skin by mating with darker people, but white Americans, with their anti-intermarriage laws, are waging an impossible war against Nature, which is demanding "a change of colors."<sup>26</sup>

Such statements reveal where Schuyler's environmental explanations of racial difference, rooted in a mixture of Darwinian logic and class analysis, spilled over into biological determinism. In part this tendency stemmed from Schuyler's desire to provide race mixture with the same aura of inevitability that granted the arguments of the professional Anglo-Saxons such popular appeal. Also, in stretching the arguments of his enemies to his own purposes, Schuyler played the role of the satirist even when he gave the appearance of more straightforward explanation and commentary. This direction in Schuyler's thought also stemmed from the influence of his good friend and colleague J. A. Rogers, whose voluminous historical research into interracial sex throughout the ages informed his ideas about nature's role in fomenting sexual contact across the color line.<sup>27</sup>

From Rogers, Schuyler borrowed the idea that throughout history, ruling classes, whether light or dark, have perpetuated themselves by taking the strongest and most desirable women of the exploited group while allowing subordinate males to mate only with the weakest and least attractive.<sup>28</sup> For Rogers this implied something bordering on a general law of human relations: that military, political, and economic conquest proceeds through sexual domination. In his various writings on this subject, most notably his three-volume study *Race and Sex*, Rogers argued that this general rule explained why lighter and darker peoples have always held a special attraction for each other.<sup>29</sup> Ruling makes the rulers

25 Charles Woodruff, *The Effects of Tropical Light on White Men* (New York: Rebman, 1905), 190–320.

26 "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 25, 1929. In "Will the White Race Turn Brown? All Races Were Once Black," an article Schuyler published anonymously in the *Illustrated Feature Section*, May 18, 1929, 2 (Schuyler Scrapbook, vol. 2, George S. Schuyler Papers, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY), he cites the research done by Charles Woodruff and others to argue for an inevitable browning of the white race. Also see Danton Smith [George S. Schuyler], "Will Negroes Rule Manhattan in 1940?," *Illustrated Feature Section*, October 5, 1929.

27 See: J. A. Rogers, "Europe's Sun Tan Fad," Schuyler Scrapbook, vol. 2, George S. Schuyler Papers, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.

28 See, for example, "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 26, 1929.

29 Joel A. Rogers, *Sex and Race: Negro-Caucasian Mixing in All Ages and Lands* (New York: J. A. Rogers Publications, 1940).

decadent. Oppression tends to preserve only the best types among the downtrodden. Eventually, as the rulers become weaker, they need the stronger types to fight wars and to carry out other strength-requiring functions. The women of the ruling group eventually notice the strength of the up-and-comers. Inclined to mate with the men who will help them birth the strongest children, they become attracted to the formerly oppressed. As it turns out, these newly superior men prove easy targets because they lust always, and for many reasons, for the women of their rulers.

Following Rogers's theory, Schuyler thought it childish to expect that blacks could attain social and economic equality with whites without marrying them.<sup>30</sup> Against the widespread belief that whites found blacks unattractive, that only the lowest whites married blacks, and that mixed couples always suffered ostracism, he promoted the opposite: that whites and blacks found each other overwhelmingly attractive, that mixed couples generally managed happy marriages despite social difficulties, and that the best of both races commonly fell in love and had begun to marry with greater frequency.<sup>31</sup> With the last of these points in mind, he told the story of John Rankin, a black man, and Bertha Soffer, his white lover. This pair grew up together, fell in love, and ran away to New York City. When the girl's parents finally caught up with the couple, they had poor John arrested and charged with abduction. At the trial, Bertha resisted the tearful pleas of her family and refused to testify against her lover. Without evidence, the court had no choice but to release the young man. In a somewhat hopeful tone, Schuyler concluded: "Now there you are. Despite all the social taboos, these young people got together. There is much more of this going on in the South than in the North. It used to be said that the only free people sexually in these United States were white men and colored women, but that is no longer as true as it used to be."<sup>32</sup>

Stories about couples like John and Bertha, many of which he published in his 1929 pamphlet *Interracial Marriage in the United States: One of the Most Interesting Phenomena in Our National Life*, helped to increase Schuyler's faith in a rising tide of resilient and determined interracial love, but his most powerful feelings of confirmation stemmed from more intimate sources. When placed next to Schuyler's ideas on interracial marriage and on the biological and economic forces behind race mixing, his own torrid romance with Josephine Cogdell appears an almost surreal instance of self-fulfilling prophecy. As a couple, George and Josephine eventually came to represent a strong antiracist symbol, a kind of public and tangible proof of deep and abiding love in black and white. In this way they defied the most important racial myths and shibboleths of their day. Yet they never really transcended race. Rather than colorblindness, their relationship depended on a long list of transvalued racist ideas, which they used to enhance their love.

30 "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 13, 1929.

31 These were the main elements of his argument in *Racial Inter-marriage in the United States*, Little Blue Book Series (Girard, KS: Haldeman-Julius, 1929).

32 "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 6, 1926.

Within the complex dynamic of their mutual attraction, an abiding consciousness of blackness and whiteness intensified the mutual recognition of personal virtue that made them admire each other with dogged conviction. Allowing for all the other reasons they found each other singularly fulfilling, one wonders upon reading Josephine's diary, which provides the only record of their intimate life, whether George and Josephine would have ever met or gotten married if they both had the same racial background. Racial difference provided them with a framework of overcoming, with a reason to invest in each other very intensely and defiantly in the spirit of "the world be damned."

The story of George and Josephine took an even more extraordinary twist when their daughter Philippa, at age two and a half, scored between 179 and 185 on an IQ test. She also showed an early facility on the piano, which led eventually to a career as a classical musician. Suddenly Schuyler, who had always questioned IQ tests, could not have been more proud. Although he promised Josephine that he would keep Philippa's astonishing test scores private, he could not suppress his desire to share this marvelous vindication of his interracial marriage with a reporter from the *Houston Informer*.<sup>33</sup> Like everyone else, the Schuylers were stunned and at a loss to explain the phenomenon they were raising. Following the way of most befuddled parents of exceptional children, they resorted to both nurture and nature to account for their good fortune. In keeping with the general thrust of Schuyler's editorials and articles on race mixing, and borrowing from theories that Josephine learned from her experiences with horticulture and animal breeding, the Schuylers speculated that Philippa's stunning intelligence had derived in part from hybrid vigor. Products of mixture, they thought, could profit from the good characteristics of both parents while minimizing the bad ones.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, they believed that the extraordinary efforts they put into shaping Philippa's environment gave her native gifts the best chance to develop. They fed her a raw food diet, which they also followed, and raised her in accordance with the rather disastrous principles of behaviorist John Watson, who advised parents to keep hugging and kissing to a minimum, provide daily sunbaths on a regular schedule, rarely bounce their child on their knee, avoid talking down to them regardless of age, reveal all of the facts of sexuality as early as possible, and shake hands with their child every morning.<sup>35</sup>

Such rules appear well suited to produce highly individuated neurotics, and in many ways that is what Philippa became. She also became a remarkable woman: an author, a humanitarian, a feminist, and a world-renowned concert pianist. In other words, she could not have represented more perfectly her parents' hope for

33 Katherine Talalay, *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Phillipa Schuyler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 50.

34 Talalay, *Composition in Black and White*, 56.

35 John and Rosalie Watson, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1928).

a new generation of superior mixed-raced Americans who would lead the country out of its racist past toward a truly democratic future. Yet Philippa never found a place of belonging in the world nearly so perfect as her position in her parents' dreams. An almost total absence of friends her own age, her status as a globetrotting child star, an intense codependent relationship with her obsessed mother, the constant absence of her busy globetrotting father, and the overwhelming effort that both of her parents put into making her the perfect symbol of their interracial love affair combined to produce a profound lifelong identity confusion. In a country where race meant almost everything, Philippa never really developed a secure sense of racial identity. Unable to find recognition in the United States for her talent, she traveled constantly to play concerts abroad. This compromised her sense of national identity. As she grew older, Philippa's national, racial, and personal identity confusions combined to play havoc with her attempts at romantic attachment. In other words, her story comes as close to a "tragic mulatto" tale as real life allows. Considering that her parents made every effort to fashion her as a pure negation of that stereotype, it becomes possible to recognize in her story some of the flaws of perfectionism, whether of the racist or antiracist variety.

At his best, Schuyler certainly recognized these flaws, and understood that he too could fall victim to excessive idealism, but in this case he appears vulnerable to his own criticism of American puritanism. Notably, he also departs in this case from the code of the "lusty virile shine," whom he expected to take over American society by being a kind of supermodern ironist with seemingly infinite moral and mental flexibility. Alas, satirizing race with a hammer does not necessarily lead to wisdom.

Nevertheless, in Schuyler's hands satire could encourage a certain boldness and mobility of thought and preserve possibilities of resistance in times when they are reduced. Also, through satire Schuyler could express his own doubleness, both his Negroness and his Americanness, to great advantage, because he could criticize and identify with both categories without taking either too seriously. Rather than making racists feel important by earnestly and fairly refuting them, he dismissed them with laughter. At the same time he engaged in a muscular criticism of black Americans, hoping to increase confidence partly by undermining the defeatist extremes of race loyalty rhetoric. Certainly Schuyler's work bears many markings of the age of segregation, but we might still find it attractive for the way that it resonates with the racial struggles of our own age. In a culture that increasingly prefers its politics in the form of entertainment or spectacle and where racial significations of every variety appear to arise and disappear with incredible speed, satire may be the only real option. In our age, everything appears to undercut nothing absolute. Satire can provide one way to maintain hope in such a situation, quite often with laughter. It allows a means of biding one's time until opportunities for opposition or advancement arise, and in this way may keep resistant possibilities alive. Of course satire has many purposes, and it has uses

in every age and for almost every political orientation, but it appears particularly effective, or at least needed, where the cultural mood becomes impatient with politics, sacrifice, and debate—where it becomes possessed with the need to turn away from an ever-present sense of death.

In “Our White Folks” Schuyler praised the “lusty virile shine” for his ability to perceive discontinuous and ironic realities in their own terms. Because this character, who combines the primitive with the supermodern, could live shrewdly and honestly, Schuyler thought that he would in good time displace the narrow and decadent white racist. He also believed that this resilient character would achieve his ends by any means necessary, employing love, sex, violence, and protest alternately. In the “Ten Commandments,” Schuyler refused to provide a straight answer to solve the “Negro Problem” because his ideal type did not need answers. His biological advantages, which derived from his African heritage and oppressed background, his hybrid vigor, and his environmental circumstances, would significantly aid his ability to thrive without them. Described this way, Schuyler’s “lusty virile shine,” whom he attempted in his own way to embody, emerges as a thoroughgoing attempt to invert both black and white racist values and to offer thereby a counterideal. In this we might find both Schuyler’s flaw and his promise. Schuyler succeeded through his writings, and through his intimate relationship with Josephine, in realizing a beautiful interracial vision. This occurred partly through his willingness to utter a loud and impractical *no* to the world around him. His satirical talents also appear in part the result of this willingness to set himself against his fellow men as the defender of high and rare ideals. In this way he appears the perfect negation of the realistic and pragmatic “moke” of “Our White Folks.” And yet it remains hard to imagine anyone better suited to articulate the virtues of that character and, against the odds, to grant those virtues a tangible, if imperfect, reality.



## 15: C. L. R. James

### Race, Revolution, and Black Liberation

Anthony Bogues

*We say, number one, that the Negro Struggle, the independent Negro Struggle, has a vitality and validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and in the present struggles it has an organic political perspective, along which it is traveling to one degree or another.*

C. L. R. James, "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem" (1948)

When C. L. R. James arrived in the USA in October 1938, he had already published his seminal English-language work on the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*. In this text he noted that to think that the "race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental."<sup>1</sup> The language here is important. James was responding to the conventional Marxist arguments around the race-class debate. His response was a nuanced one and showed his willingness to grapple with the ways racial domination operated. It would, however, take a sojourn in America between 1938 and 1952 for him to theoretically and politically tease this out. *The Black Jacobins* was in great part the result of James's theoretical and political work as a Marxist and his joint political and journalistic work in London with George Padmore and the International African Service Bureau.<sup>2</sup> While living in London after migrating from the Caribbean island of Trinidad in 1931, James, like many black radicals, supported Ethiopia against the Italian invasion, even making an unsuccessful attempt to volunteer to fight with the Ethiopian army. As well, he

<sup>1</sup> C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 283.

<sup>2</sup> The International African Service Bureau was a pan-African organization formed by George Padmore, C. L. R. James, Amy Ashwood Garvey, and others. Formed in London in 1936, it was the main anticolonial group in England and had an extraordinary publishing program. Padmore published *How Britain Ruled Africa*; James published both *Black Jacobins* and *The History of Negro Revolt*; and Jomo Kenyatta published *Facing Mount Kenya*. The group also published a regular newspaper, the *International African Opinion*. For a full discussion of the group and its activities see Matthew Quest, "George Padmore's and C. L. R. James's *International African Opinion*," in *George Padmore: Pan-African Revolutionary*, ed. Fitzroy Baptiste and Rupert Lewis (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2000), 105–32. See also Leslie James *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan Africanism, Cold War and the End of Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

wrote a book on the history of black revolt, *The History of Negro Revolt*. Thus the James who arrived in America was a radical political thinker and historian acutely aware of anticolonial struggles in Africa and the Caribbean. In the 1938 edition of *History of Negro Revolt* he had included a chapter on African American slave rebellions and resistance, showing that he was aware of the racial domination of African Americans in the USA.

James arrived in America on a speaking tour organized by the small Trotskyist party, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). He arrived at a moment when the various currents within the Marxist movement were confronting what was then called the “Negro Problem.” From as early as 1913 onward, W. E. B. Du Bois had written a number of essays addressing the fraught relationship between Marxist theory, race, and black freedom. In an essay in *New Review* published in 1913, “Socialism and the Negro Problem,” Du Bois declared that “the Negro problem then is the great test of the American Socialist.”<sup>3</sup> Historically there have always been profound tensions between Marxism and the political drives and impulses of black radical liberation struggles. When the Socialist Party of America was formed in 1901, racial lynching was a regular occurrence, yet there was no political resolution on lynching passed at the party’s founding convention. During its first twenty years the party produced only one political pamphlet about antiblack racism. Further, by 1917, along with the political and journalistic work of Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen in the newspaper the *Messenger*, there was a growing radical political mood among many black radicals, and some gravitated toward socialism and forms of radical labor politics as well radical black nationalist organizations.<sup>4</sup> In the midst of this gravitation there emerged the single largest black organization of the early twentieth century, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, led by Marcus Garvey. A formidable black nationalist organization, the UNIA from 1919 to 1927 represented the apex of black mobilization. Its political framework was rooted in social and political conceptions of black self-help, black economic power, black self-respect, and the recognition of the centrality of Africa to the black political imagination.<sup>5</sup>

3 W. E. B. Du Bois, “Socialism and the Negro Problem,” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 579.

4 Philip Randolph became a leading member of the Socialist Party for a time. For an excellent and brief discussion of him and his political and trade union work see Manning Marable, “A. Phillip Randolph and the Foundations of Black American Socialism,” in *Worker’s Struggles, Past and Present*, ed. James Green (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983). Chandler Owen was also an early member of the Socialist Party, and together he and Randolph began in 1917 the journal called *Messenger*.

5 For discussions of Garveyism and the UNIA see Amy Jacques Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Martino Fine Books, 2014). Of course there are Robert Hill’s monumental thirteen edited volumes of the UNIA papers, which give us a sense of both the international and the American dimensions of the movement and its ideas (see *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, ed. Robert Hill, 13 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983–2016). For a recent biography of Garvey that focuses on the

Nationalism has always been a central thread in African American political thought.<sup>6</sup> Racial slavery not only created antiblack racism but produced theories and racial practices about human classification in which the black body was assigned to the location of *lack*. In the 1970s Sylvia Wynter compellingly argued that the norm of the free white man creates a relation where the “black becomes the absolute counter-man.”<sup>7</sup> She continues that this was “only made possible by the blacks’ existence as a negated group.”<sup>8</sup> I argue that within the social system of racial slavery there is a double negation. The first is the negation consolidated through the process of racial slavery, a historical process that turned Africans into what the Caribbean historian Elsa Goveia called “property in persons.” The second negation then turns upon the first and made racial categories signs not only of visual difference but of ontological lack. In this context black nationalism became the terrain through which black dignity and blackness were mobilized as counter-ontological forces to the dominant general Western schema of hierarchical human classification. Thus black nationalism as a form of political thought was dissimilar in both direction and content to conventional political nationalism. Black nationalism was a double-sized political notion, however; it could become a catalyst for more radical political ideas, or it could freeze and remain at the level of nationalism in which radical politics became problematic. As such it was always a difficult political notion for Marxists to grapple with.<sup>9</sup>

In the early twentieth century many American Marxists were influenced by and supported the political ideas of Lenin. Some of Lenin’s political ideas foregrounded nationalism and political self-determination in the colonial territories as politics that could create the ground for revolution. Therefore he advocated that such movements should be supported by the Marxist movement. With regard to the race question in the USA, Lenin’s political ideas led to a series of analyses of the “Negro Problem” as primarily one of nationality and racial minority. In 1919 Lenin himself had noted that there was a difference between the “nationalism of the oppressed and that of the oppressor.” Yet it seems that many American Marxists could not fully grapple with that perspective. The American Communist Party in the late 1920s and early 1930s developed a political policy that became known

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Caribbean, see Rupert Lewis, *Marcus Garvey* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2018)

6 For a discussion of this, see Dean Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a volume that produces many of the seminal documents of this current, see John Bracy, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *Black Nationalism in America* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970).

7 Sylvia Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis,” 65. This manuscript is in author’s possession and is currently being edited for publication.

8 Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis,” 65.

9 One way this problematic was dealt with within radical black organizations in the 1960s and 1970s was the distinction made between revolutionary nationalism and what was colloquially called “pork chop nationalism.” For this distinction see Huey P. Newton, interview, *The Movement* 4, no. 8 (1968), available at <https://medium.com/@merricatherine/huey-p-newtons-interview-with-the-movement-magazine-1968-a328e6b78c32>.

as the “Black Belt.” At its core was the idea that the area from Texas to Virginia should be put aside for the black population. Du Bois was critical and wrote in the *Crisis*, “They swear by all that is holy such a plan of plain segregation is not segregation, but who can predict what they will say tomorrow or next week?”<sup>10</sup> His view represented the concerns of other black radicals who felt that given the history of American antiblack racism and the structural features of racism, the Black Belt idea was a political move that would consolidate formal segregation.<sup>11</sup>

In his 1933 essay on Marxism, Du Bois carefully confronts the theoretical postulates of Marxism and writes: “The Negro is exploited . . . and that exploitation comes not from a black capitalistic class but from the white capitalists and equally the white proletariat. His only defense is such internal organization as will protect him.” He continues: “There is not at present the slightest indication that a Marxian revolution is anywhere on the American far horizon. Rather race antagonism and labor group rivalry is still undisturbed by world catastrophe. In the hearts of black laborers alone, therefore, lie these ideals of democracy in politics and industry which may in time make the workers of the world effective dictators of civilization.”<sup>12</sup> Such a perspective reversed the role of the American proletariat and marked the black worker as the social catalyst for political and social transformation. If in Marxist theory the proletariat was the agent of revolutionary change, Du Bois was positing was that given the levels of structural antiblack racism, the majority of the American working class was not capable of leading such a revolution. Here Du Bois was drawing from his own understanding of the “wages of whiteness” as part of the ideological consciousness and common sense of the white American working class. Such a consciousness would blunt any drive for radical social change. In understanding the ways in which racial domination operated, Du Bois was also making the point that antiblack racism was not a phenomenon of secondary significance in American society but was central to its foundational historical, discursive, and political grounds.

In his seminal 1935 *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois takes this notion of the centrality of the black worker further when he reworks the categories of Marxism. In the text he renames the black slave as a black worker, calls the mass movement of the slaves from the plantations during the Civil War a “general strike,” and then creates a series of distinctions between freedom and emancipation.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, cited in Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 33–34.

<sup>11</sup> As is typical in political practice, there were instances in which communist organizing particularly in the field of trade unionism pulled in African Americans and was critical to African American struggles. For an important discussion of this, see Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Du Bois, “Marxism and the Negro Problem” (1933), in *African American Political Thought, 1890–1930*, ed. Cary D. Wintz (New York: Routledge, 1995), 151, 152.

<sup>13</sup> For an extensive discussion of these theoretical formulations see Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 2003)

It is now commonly acknowledged that the work of Du Bois constitutes a seminal current in African American political thought and historiography. What is often elided in this characterization is how Du Bois reformulated Marxist theory in the 1930s and developed a distinctive way of thinking about what he writes so poignantly in *Souls of Black Folk*: what does it mean to be a problem?<sup>14</sup>

In this essay I argue that C. L. R. James's theoretical interventions during his first American sojourn attempted to grapple with the contours of African American struggles. Second, these attempts, which generated many critical essays, should be considered as producing a line of critical thinking that reformulated the centrality of black life to the transformation of American society. Third, I would submit that in these attempts and by reworking Marxism, James had some similar preoccupations as those that underlay Du Bois's theoretical and historical work. Here I am arguing that at the level of both theory and history, James and Du Bois operated in discursive and political contexts aiming to generate new ways of thinking about the African American human condition. They did so separately, since James was an active member of the Marxist movement in the United States while Du Bois operated outside of that movement for much of his political life.<sup>15</sup> James belongs to a cohort of black radical thinkers of the twentieth century who practiced a form of critical political thought which can be called Black Critique. This form of critical political thought or theory interrogates political modernity with specific attention to liberalism while drawing from Marxism and revising it. In this current, new histories and political formulations appear. While the current often begins with questions of racial domination, its political horizons move to challenge the structures of capitalism, positing new practices of freedom that go beyond liberal liberty.<sup>16</sup>

### James and the Negro Problem: His First American Sojourn

C. L. R. James had two sojourns in America. In the first, 1938 to 1952, he was an active member of the Marxist movement. During this period he functioned as an "underground man" using various political names to shield his identity from immigration officials (since after a six-month visa extension given in 1939 he was

14 This reformulation and positing of something distinctive has been a feature of the black radical tradition. For a discussion of this practice, see Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (London: Zed, 1983).

15 Du Bois was a member of the Socialist Party for a while. He joined the American Communist Party in 1961. James, on the other hand, was always a member of some current of the Marxist movement. In the late 1940s he and others founded his own political tendency, the Johnson-Forest Tendency. Some of the key political theoretical ideas of the tendency were following the Soviet Union as a state capitalist formation, abolishing the Leninist political party, and the centrality of the African American struggle to the social transformation of the American society.

16 For a discussion of this, see Anthony Bogue, *Black Critique: Towards an Alternative Genealogy of Critical Thought* (London: Pluto, 2021).

illegal), as well as engaging in the common revolutionary practice of the time of using political pseudonyms. In this period James wrote and did political work under names like J. Meyer, AAB, and JR. Johnson. The latter was the most common and important name—so much so that when he and others formed their own independent Marxist tendency in 1947, it was called Johnson-Forest Tendency.<sup>17</sup> Between 1938 and 1952, when immigration orders forced him to leave America, James produced a remarkable body of philosophical, political theoretical, literary, and cultural work. It included books on Hegel, Marx, and dialectics, collaborative writings on the nature of Soviet Union as a state capitalist formation, an extensive examination of American civilization, a literary analysis of the work of Herman Melville focusing on the novel *Moby-Dick*, and countless journalistic articles about American politics, book reviews, and commentaries on events. In doing this work, James functioned as a writer, revolutionary thinker, and journalist. Within this corpus of work generated over a period of fourteen years, James wrote extensively about the experiences, history, and political ideas of the African American population. This aspect of his work was not a minor key but central to his own grasp of American society and even more critically created new discursive grounds which then profoundly shaped his general political thought after he left the United States.

When he began his American lecture tour, James's main topics were British imperialism, the anticolonial movements in Africa and the Caribbean, and the various contributions of peoples of African descent to revolutionary struggles. However, by 1939 he began to focus on the race question in America and traveled to Mexico to meet with the exiled coleader of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky. In preparation for this meeting James produced a document titled "Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question."<sup>18</sup> Beginning from a broad diasporic perspective, James notes that "the 14 to 15 million Negroes in the USA represent potentially the most militant section of the population." We have, he observes, "historical proof, first in the part played by the negroes in the Civil War and in the response to Marcus Garvey. . . . The Negroes responds not only to national but to international questions." In this regard, James notes how during the Ethiopian crisis, thousands of "negroes were ready to go and fight" and that since the "trouble in the West Indies, Jamaicans in New York have formed a Jamaica Progressive League. . . . Finally, I am informed that a new spirit is moving among the Negroes, in Harlem and elsewhere today."<sup>19</sup>

Two things about the beginnings of this essay. First, James points to political activity as a sign of radical/progressive thinking. Second, with specific reference

17 For a discussion of this tendency and its work as well as its political ideas, see Anthony Bogues, *Caliban's Freedom: The Early Political Thought of C. L. R. James* (London: Pluto, 1997).

18 C. L. R. James, "Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question" (1939), in C. L. R. James on the "Negro Question," ed. Scott McLemee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 3–14.

19 James, "Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question," 14.

to the African American population, he finds himself reporting on reports given to him, indicating that he had not yet immersed himself in the population and its life. What is also noteworthy about this document is that its proposals are based upon a historical reading of the situation of the African American population and are directed specifically to the party and Trotsky, with an eye toward creating a distinctive policy and political practice for the SWP.

James exhibits a tentativeness in this text when he moves to cover the various independent black mass organizations at the time. He then posits that the African American population in the 1930s represented “potentially the most revolutionary section of the population” and “was ready for militant leadership.” This formulation meant he would argue the need to pay attention to the creation of what was then called a “Negro Organization.” For James and many other Marxists of the period, the question of organization was central. Independently of Marxist groups, at that time radical black organizations were flourishing. Thus one political issue that faced many black Marxists was how to relate to these organizations. However even more critical was whether Marxists could or should build independent radical black organizations. James in his 1938 document puts the issue this way: “The question of the Negro Organization is one that deserves the closest study. . . . The Negro himself will have the satisfaction of supporting his own movement.”<sup>20</sup> Within this document all the political and theoretical issues that would preoccupy him were laid bare.

From within the conventional Marxist frame, we have already noted that racial oppression in the USA meant that the African American population should be considered a national minority with rights to self-determination. In James’s political mind, self-determination did not require a separate state but aimed for equality within the American polity. He noted in the essay that the African American must be won over to socialism, since there “is no other way out for him in America.”<sup>21</sup> Yet James also made it clear to Trotsky and others that the African American would support the Marxist movement only on the “basis of his own experience and his own activity.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, he was making it clear that the African American population could not be won over to socialism if the political arguments and activities did not connect deeply with the everyday experiences of the black population. Thus at that moment in James’s political thought, African American self-determination was limited to organizational political formations. In James’s mind, black organizations were necessary given the antiblack racism of white workers; however, even though they had the right to independent political life, they could not enact the socialist revolution by themselves. This was James’s political thinking in 1939, and in many ways it was in sync with conventional Marxist thinking, with the exception of the centrality of black independent organization.

20 James, “Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question,” 14.

21 James, “Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question,” 14.

22 James, “Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question,” 14.

What is interesting in James's discussion with Trotsky was that the latter saw the African American struggle in its then current stage as "pre-political . . . [thus] theoretically," Trotsky noted, "it seems absolutely clear that a special organization should be created for a special situation."<sup>23</sup> Put another way, in Trotsky's mind the African American struggle was not yet as advanced as that of the proletariat and therefore required a special program and policy that would make it politically mature in due course. The political assumption here was that the proletariat was the most advanced social class and therefore all other social classes were secondary to the proletarian struggle for socialism. The modernist assumption was that there were "backward" and "advanced" groupings and social formations.

James's response to Trotsky was to outline a plan for a black organization. The proposed program was divided into theoretical and historical segments followed by an organizational segment. In the first segment, James proposed that the party focus on studying "Negro History." Specifically, he suggested that this study include the Haitian Revolution and its relationship to the French Revolution, and the abolition of slavery in the British colonies and how this was linked to the British Reform Bill of 1832. He also proposed that the party needed to do a detailed study of the "emancipation of the Negroes in the United States linked with the Civil War in America."<sup>24</sup> James's proposal was rooted in a historical method grounded in the nodal radical historical moments in African Diaspora history. It followed his own historical work published in London in 1938, particularly *History of Negro Revolt*. In general James's historical writings have focused on moments of revolt, revolution, or change. This was in sync with his political optimism based on a philosophy of history in which social change was not only necessary but always open. If in London working with George Padmore and others in the International African Service Bureau, James focused on Africa and the Caribbean and conceptualized black struggle as a pan-African one, in the USA his political preoccupation during his first sojourn was with the African American struggle and its relationship to the movement for socialism and the white American working class.<sup>25</sup> Thus he ends the historical and theoretical segment of the proposed program by arguing that these historical studies would lead to the "conclusion that the emancipation of the Negro in USA and abroad is linked with the emancipation of the white working class."<sup>26</sup>

23 C. L. R. James, "Discussions with Trotsky," in *At the Rendezvous of Victory: Selected Writings* (London: Allison & Busby, 1984), 42.

24 James, "Discussions with Trotsky," 43.

25 So for example in *History of Negro Revolt*, James ends the original volume with a series of observations on the possibilities of African political independence in much the same way that he ends *Black Jacobins*, published in 1938. In the 1969 revised version, *History of Revolt* by radical black collective bookshop Drum and Spear in DC, James includes a new epilogue titled "A History of Pan-African Revolt, A Summary: 1939–1969." Here he confirms his perspective of grappling with the black struggle in the USA as linked to a pan-African one. The book was published in his second American sojourn, 1968 to 1980. In the first edition published in 1938, James's political intervention in the African American struggle was not pan-Africanist.

26 James, "Discussions with Trotsky," 43.



Of course this was different from Du Bois's historical and theoretical formulations. Four years prior to James's discussion in Mexico with Trotsky, Du Bois had written in *Black Reconstruction* that "the emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black."<sup>27</sup> In his theoretical and historical thinking in the 1930s, Du Bois was clear that it would be the dark proletariat of the world that would challenge capital. On the other hand, while James saw the independent African American struggle as critical and integral to the overall struggle for socialism, he did not at that time see the movement as leading that struggle. The difference between these two individuals in 1939 was that Du Bois in his political and theoretical work had already identified that the "wages of whiteness" would result in a "color caste system" which, by the "insistence of white labor, became the basis of a system of industry which ruined democracy and showed its perfect fruit in World War and Depression."<sup>28</sup> This conception of the political significance of the "wages of whiteness" was absent from James's political thought.

In 1945 he began to pay some attention to this issue by writing an article, "White Workers' Prejudices." In the essay James observed that the antagonism of the "white worker to the Negro" was in great part due to the system of capitalism."<sup>29</sup> Missing from this political analysis is any grappling with antiblack racism as a practice and a commonsense ideological construction. Instead the focus is on the structures of Jim Crow and its effects. In 1939 James in his political thought was still holding on to the idea that antiblack racism was in reality a secondary phenomenon. It would take a few more years before he shifted. In the organizational segment of the proposal, James argued for the establishment of a weekly newspaper and that the *International African Opinion* become the theoretical journal of the new organization.<sup>30</sup> The proposal was not implemented, and the SWP did not build any independent black organization, and although there was a "Negro" department, its political work did not yield any major success.

By the 1940s James had profound political disagreements with the SWP centered on the character of the Soviet Union, and with others, he resigned and formed the Workers Party. In 1941 he traveled to southeast Missouri to help organize a sharecroppers strike. Before that he had spent some time in 1939 writing historical sketches of black history. Here of course he was following the now typical pattern of black radical practice—begin with history. In his various historical essays he discussed the Atlantic slave trade, African civilization, comparative abolition processes, and the role of Lincoln as well as that of Marcus Garvey.

27 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; repr. New York: Free Press, 1998), 16.

28 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, 30.

29 James, "White Workers Prejudice," in C. L. R. James on the "Negro Question", 46–48.

30 This is interesting since James edited the *International African Opinion* when he was in London. This part of James's proposal can be seen as an effort to find support for the journal, since by then he had been in the USA not yet a year and was perhaps still thinking of returning to London.

### Writing Black History

James continued his preoccupation with history in his 1950 essay "Key Problems in the Study of Negro History." Here he observed that the "study of Negro History [has] reached a critical stage" and that the writers in this field have "accumulated an imposing body of facts which demonstrate the active participation of Negroes in the making of American history."<sup>31</sup> For James, historical facts were necessary but not sufficient. There were many historians ensnared by facts, and as a consequence they could not grapple with "the significance of . . . Douglass."<sup>32</sup> Arguing that Douglass was the most "symbolical figure of the pre-Civil War period,"<sup>33</sup> James suggested that the problem with the writing of black history at the time was the absence of a "philosophy of history." One should here of course recall Du Bois in the 1930s making a study of Marx as he wrote *Black Reconstruction*.<sup>34</sup> So James was not accurate about the lack of historical philosophy in the writing of black history at the time. He himself in *Black Jacobins* had practiced a form of historical writing in which the revolutionary slaves of St. Domingue had vindicated themselves by making the Haitian Revolution. This form of vindicationist history was a critical historical practice confronting the deep silences in Western historiography about Africa and the African Diaspora.<sup>35</sup> In America, history was an ideological tool in the arsenal of antiblack racism. To confront this, radical black historians wrote African Americans into history as agents. Such a historical practice created new historical knowledge about events. It often meant that alternative interpretations had to be presented as an antidote to what Du Bois called the "propaganda of history."

All this raises the question whether there is a theory of historical writing that emerges from the writing of black history. When one compares the historical writings of James, Du Bois, and Carter G. Woodson, three differences are apparent. All of them practiced historical writing as a way to revise the exclusionary character of American and Western historiography. However, for each the objective of historical knowledge was different. For Woodson it was about clearing ground to show the various contributions of African Americans to American history and to correct dominant misconceptions. For James and Du Bois it was about intervening into historical knowledge about a specific moment—in other words, using their present preoccupations to rewrite the past. In James's case it was to historically describe the Haitian Revolution as a way to make a case for African independence. For Du Bois it was to intervene into an early twentieth-century debate about the

31 James, "Key Problems in the Study of Negro History" (1950), in *Negro Question*, 125.

32 James, "Key Problems in the Study of Negro History," 126.

33 James, "Key Problems in the Study of Negro History," 126.

34 For a discussion of this study of Du Bois on Marx, see his notes for his lectures on Marx at Atlanta University. The notes are in the Du Bois papers at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I want to thank Zach Sell for bringing them to my attention.

35 For a discussion of vindicationism, see St. Clair Drake, "Anthropology and the Black Experience," *Black Scholar* 11, no. 7 (September-October 1980): 2-31.

character of Reconstruction and to confront the popular racist narratives about African Americans amplified by D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. I have argued elsewhere before that this kind of interventionist historical practice creates new social and political categories.<sup>36</sup> However, there is a third element of black radical historical writing. It is historical writing which is done as an explicit political act. Thus for the radical black historian, historical knowledge is a central element in the drive to transform a society. This is not history written only in the service of conventional knowledge; rather, historical knowledge becomes one ground of contestation on a terrain where history is not a method of truth telling but a narrative practice in which the writing itself, drawing from an archive, creates alternative historical records.<sup>37</sup>

I submit that all of the above is critical to African American political thought since one aspect of the practice of political thought is how an individual engages with specific concerns that circle around political and social questions. Yet these questions, while making their appearance in moments, come to us with historical clouds. As a political thinker James was deeply aware of the workings of history, and it would shape his most remarkable political text about the African American struggles of the mid-twentieth century.

### The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem

By 1948 James had been in America for a decade. He was by then a major Marxist theorist known for his collaborative work within the Johnson-Forest Tendency, and as one of the originators of the theory of state capitalism and a central figure in creating an independent Marxism for his time.<sup>38</sup> As a Marxist revolutionary James continued to be preoccupied with the African American struggle. During the ten years he had lived in America, he developed a close friendship with Richard Wright and reviewed *Native Son*. He was also in conversation with the novelist Ralph Ellison. **If in his writings before 1948 James had foregrounded the revolutionary party and posited that there was a need for an independent black organization to be politically organized by the party, by 1948 he began to revise his political ideas about the necessity and validity of the revolutionary party for the making of the revolution.**

In the late 1940s while in Nevada, James undertook a rereading of Hegel's

36 For discussion of this see, Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*, chap. 3.

37 For a discussion of history and the black radical tradition, see Bogues, *Black Critique*.

38 The term *state capitalism* has a long history and first emerged in the late nineteenth century in Germany. When James and his colleagues deployed the term in the late 1940s, it was a theoretical formulation that argued against Trotsky's conception of Russia as a deformed workers' state. It was deployed to mark out a different Marxist political perspective about the then Soviet Union: that although the Soviet state controlled the economy, there was no worker control of the means of production. Thus the state and its apparatus operated similarly to private capitalists. The political basis of this perspective was to posit that the core of Marxist theory and politics was worker control as the basis for the eradication of wage labor and surplus value extraction.

work, particularly *The Phenomenology of Mind*. This was a customary reading practice at moments of crisis within the Marxist movement, one began by Lenin. James's rereading of Hegel's work led him to write for his closet colleagues a series of notes that later were published as *Notes on Dialectics*. The political/philosophical core of this text was that the Leninist party had become an obstacle to the self-organization of the working class and its drive for socialism and therefore should be abolished. With the shadow of the party gone from his political thought, James turned to the African American struggle and produced his most important text.

Against the background of Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 influential book *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, James's new position on the necessity of abolishing the Leninist party, and a failed project on which he and Richard Wright planned to work, *The Negro Speaks*, James looked afresh at the African American struggle. He announced this new position in a talk delivered in 1948. He began with an analysis of the features of capitalism on the world stage and noted that, within the context of capitalist decay, the struggles of the "Negro people have precipitated a tremendous battle . . . for the minds of the population of the US as a whole over the Negro Question."<sup>39</sup> Arguing that *The American Dilemma* was a sign of the American elite's recognition of the centrality of the "Negro Problem," James set out to establish an independent Marxist view of the centrality of the African American struggle to the possibilities of radically transforming American society. Arguing against the conventional Marxist position that the African American struggle needed to be linked to the labor movement and the revolutionary party, James declared:

We say number one, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and its present struggles. . . . We say number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with a terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights. . . . We say number three, and this is the most important, that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat, that it has a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism.<sup>40</sup>

In this theoretical formulation the African American struggle was no longer secondary or subordinate to the American working-class struggle for socialism; instead it had become the catalyst for such struggle and thereby central to it.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> James, "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States" (1948), in *Negro Question*, 138.

<sup>40</sup> James, "Revolutionary Answer," 139.

<sup>41</sup> It is important to note that Claudia Jones wrote a seminal essay, published in the Communist Party journal *Political Affairs* in 1949, pointing out the absence of black women from Marxist analysis. The essay, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women," is a central docu-

As was his methodological practice, James rooted this new analysis in historical movement. He noted that during the Civil War, the abolition of slavery became a necessity and that in this process the “Negroes demanded their rights.” Yet while James gives the independent African American movement a new and crucial weight in the struggle for socialism, he makes it clear that this independent movement is going into the direction of the proletariat, and if it is not supported then “repression of the past times when the revolutionary forces failed the Negro will be infinitely, I repeat infinitely more terrible today.”<sup>42</sup>

Of some interest to us here is how elements of Ralph Ellison’s critique of *American Dilemma* at the time resonated with some of James’s thought. Writing shortly after the book appeared, Ellison observes that the full “solution will lie in the creation of democracy in which the Negro will be free to define himself for what he is and, within the large framework of that democracy, for what he desires to be.”<sup>43</sup> He goes on to note that “the limitations of Myrdal’s vision of American democracy do not lie vague and misty beyond the horizon of history. They can be easily discerned through the Negro perspective.”<sup>44</sup> What James was doing in his seminal 1948 essay was recognizing this “Negro perspective.”

The 1948 essay marked a high point in James’s first sojourn in the USA. Marxism in whatever political guise has had a troubled and complex relationship to the black liberation struggle of African Americans. It has not been a smooth history.<sup>45</sup> What is clear, though, is that there has been an engagement of many black radicals with various genres of Marxism. Sometimes this engagement has produced political thought that draws heavily from Marxism; other times it has not. Du Bois, after making a serious study of Marxism, noted in his 1933 essay “Marxism and the Negro Problem” that “the Marxian philosophy is a true diagnosis of the situation in Europe in the middle of the 19th century . . . but it must be modified in the United States of America and especially so far as the Negro group is concerned.” James as a Marxist grappled with making those modifications on his first American sojourn.

## Conclusion

In 1952 James left America under threat of deportation. He did not return until late 1960s, when a group of black academics led by Gregory Rigsby petitioned for his

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ment in black radical political thought. For a discussion of Jones’s work and thought, see Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2008).

<sup>42</sup> James, “Revolutionary Answer,” 145.

<sup>43</sup> Ralph Ellison, “An American Dilemma: A Review” (1944), in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1953/1995), 304.

<sup>44</sup> Ellison, “American Dilemma,” 315.

<sup>45</sup> For discussions about that history, see Kelly, *Hammer and Hoe*; cf. Mark Nasion, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (New York: Grove, 1974). For an earlier historical work, see Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (New York: Atheneum, 1951).

return. On his return, he taught at Howard University and Federal City College (now University of District of Columbia). In his second sojourn he actively worked with former members of SNCC and was a moving force in the convening of the Sixth Pan-African Congress held in Tanzania in 1974. During this second sojourn in the USA he delivered numerous lectures on the African American struggle and began to single out Du Bois as a pivotal figure in the intellectual and political history of African American life.<sup>46</sup> Before his return to the USA, in 1957 he had a meeting with Martin Luther King Jr. when King passed through London. James writes that after discussions with King and his wife about the Montgomery Bus boycott, he now understood it as a “new experience which demands the most serious analysis.” He goes on to call the boycott “one of the most astonishing events of endurance by a whole population that I have ever heard,” saying it represented the “always unsuspected power of the mass movement.”<sup>47</sup> James compared the boycott to the tactics of mass boycott deployed by Kwame Nkrumah in the struggle for Ghanaian political independence. At that moment he had once again begun to connect the political dots of segments of black struggles. What pushed him to connect dots was the centrality of the mass movement. For James the African American movement was a modern mass movement that would remake America.

His 1948 talk had theorized the possibilities of a new moment in mid-twentieth-century America. In 1948 the Cold War was not yet a dominant force in world politics. By the 1950s it would shape American and world politics, but the African American mass movement did not abate. What James had recognized was the remarkable depth of that movement. James’s contribution to African American political thought in the mid twentieth century was to deploy his independent Marxism to create a theoretical political space for the African American struggle as the catalyst for the coming American revolution. In contrast to Du Bois, who understood that the black population was a touchstone for the revision of American democracy, for James black struggle became the catalytic source for the American socialist revolution. James, then in his first American sojourn worked as an individual of the black radical tradition influenced and shaped by Marxism. This form of black radicalism was a tradition that included many Caribbean figures—those who belonged to the American Communist Party and those who critiqued it while continuing to work on radical grounds.<sup>48</sup> In the case of James, his first American

46 For a discussion of James’s second sojourn and his political thought, see Anthony Bogues, “C. L. R. James: Pan Africanism and the Black Radical Tradition,” *Critical Arts* 25, no. 4 (2011): 484–99.

47 James, Letter on Meeting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., March 25, 1957, Sojourner Truth Organization Digital Archive.

48 One Caribbean figure who was central to the party was of course Hubert Harrison, who has been called the “the father of Harlem radicalism.” For a discussion of his life, see Jeffery Perry, ed., *Hubert Harrison Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001). There is also the political figure, Otto Huiswoud who should be mentioned here. For a discussion of Caribbean radicalism in early twentieth-century New York City, see Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia* (London: Verso, 1990).

sojourn refined a central element of his political thought—the creative potential of the ordinary person and the mass movement. Nowhere was this clearer to him than in the African American struggles in the mid-twentieth century.

Such a reading of James's political thought and the ways in which the African American struggle shaped his political ideas run counter to many readings of James as a Marxist theoretician. Yet in many ways James belonged to a cohort of twentieth-century political thinkers for whom the African American struggle was pivotal. In a 1967 speech delivered in London on black power, James asserted that "Black Power [was] destined to become one of the great political slogans of our time." He argued that "it represents the high peak of thought on the Negro Question which has been going on for over half a century." Making the point that the African American struggle was that "section of the US which is most advanced politically,"<sup>49</sup> James posited that the African American struggle and the slogan of Black Power would also constitute a vanguard for third world struggles.

Almost thirty years after he first came to the USA, James's political notion of the centrality of the African American struggle was now a central element of his political thought. It would remain so until his passing in 1989.

49 James, "Black Power" (London, 1967; photocopy typescript in author's possession).

## 16: Langston Hughes's Ambivalent Political Expressivism

Jason Frank

### 1.

Langston Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri; he died in 1967 in New York City, where he lived in Harlem for most of his adult life. Hughes began his writing career early, publishing one of his most celebrated poems—"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"—in *Crisis* magazine in 1921, and his first book of poems, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. He was among the most prominent of the "New Negroes" and a leading light of the Harlem Renaissance, an aesthetic movement for which he also wrote "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," a resounding manifesto and declaration of principles on the political promise of, and obstacles to, the development of a distinctive black aesthetics. It is the most probing and theoretically insightful essay Hughes ever wrote, and it established a conceptual framework for understanding the wider scope of his life and work.<sup>1</sup>

By the time of his death, Hughes had become one of the most prolific American writers of the twentieth century. His *Collected Works* comprises sixteen volumes and includes examples of a remarkable variety of literary genres: the novel, autobiography, essays, the short story, song lyrics, drama, journalism, children's books, history, and of course poetry. It was as a poet that Hughes achieved his greatest public recognition, and it was through poetry that he discovered his own sense of political vocation and artistic self-understanding. Hughes traveled the world and wrote extensively on behalf of the downtrodden and the dispossessed, not only in the United States, where he advocated valiantly against violent white supremacy and class injustice, from rural Scottsboro to urban Chicago, but also internationally on behalf of republican forces in the Spanish Civil War, "shoeless" Haitian citizens living under the boot of American imperialism, and the exploited peoples of Africa struggling to achieve spiritual dignity and economic justice. Any attempt to assess Hughes's political thought must obviously attend to his lifelong political activism, but his most distinctive contribution to African American political thought is arguably not to be found in his changing ideological investments—like so many other literary radicals of the 1930s, Hughes would eventually abandon

1 For the history of Hughes's life and work I have relied throughout on Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1, 1902–1941, *I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 2, 1941–1967, *I Dream a World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).



his socialist militancy for a reformist liberalism—nor in the depth of his political analysis of domestic or international vectors of race and class. It is instead in his understanding of the relationship between the artist—and especially the poet—and the people, between aesthetics and politics. There is a consistency in Hughes's dynamic understanding of this relationship that is not to be found in his express political commitments or his changing ideological orientations. Hughes's distinctive if also ambivalent form of political expressivism sets him apart from the work of such prominent contemporaries as W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Zora Neale Hurston, on the one hand, and that of later proponents of *Négritude* and the Black Arts Movement, on the other. Before turning to Hughes's political expressivism, however, we must bring his changing ideological commitments in clearer view.

## 2.

"Let America be America again," Hughes wrote in 1936. "Let it be the dream it used to be."<sup>2</sup> These are the opening lines of Hughes's best-known political poem, and, relatedly, one of his least understood. Hughes's famous invocation of the unrealized "dream" of American "liberty" and "equality" is often taken to be a poetic condensation of his broader political orientation as a "connected critic" of racial domination in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Alongside such poems as "I, Too" and "Lincoln Monument: Washington," "Let America Be America Again" seems to signal Hughes's commitment to immanent critique, his affirmation of America's founding commitment to equality and the rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as sufficient criteria for condemning its violent history of white supremacy. Hughes is in this manner recruited into liberal nationalist narratives of redemptive constitutionalism, political dissent in the service of "achieving our country."<sup>4</sup>

"Let America Be America Again" originally appeared in *Esquire* before being anthologized in *A New Song* in 1938. The editors at *Esquire* could be said to have initiated the poem's exceptionalist appropriation, long before John Kerry briefly selected the poem's title as a slogan for his failed 2004 presidential campaign,<sup>5</sup> when they agreed to publish only the first fifty lines of the poem—ending with

2 Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 189–91. All subsequent citations to Hughes's poetry are from this volume and are parenthetically cited with title and page numbers in the body of the text.

3 Michael Walzer, *In the Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

4 The phrase is James Baldwin's, but the American exceptionalist framing of it is elaborated in Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

5 John Kerry offers his own exceptionalist interpretation of Hughes's poem in his preface to Langston Hughes, *Let America Be America Again* (New York: George Braziller, 2005).

“To build a homeland of the free”—and to exclude the concluding thirty-four lines, which assume a decidedly more radical tone, proclaiming that it is not integration into an already existing American ideal that Hughes’s poem envisions so much as collective transformation and redemption “from those who live like leeches on the people’s lives.” “We must take back our land again,” Hughes declared in the poem’s concluding lines, and the “we” of this regenerative retaking—Hughes invokes the poor man, the Indian, the Negro, the ME—was composed of the very people whose subordination had provided the material conditions on which American freedom was built (“Let America Be America Again,” 191). Hughes objected to the *Esquire* editors’ demands and argued that the concluding lines were essential to the poem’s “dialectical solution,” the transformative resolution to the dialogue it stages between the culturally authoritative perspective of redemptive futurity and the parenthetical minoritarian voice of one “who mumbles in the dark” and “draws [a] veil across the stars.” The *Esquire* editors refused Hughes’s request; Hughes relented and, as his biographer Arnold Rampersad reports, “pocketed the money.”<sup>6</sup>

During the 1930s Hughes published “some of the most radical pieces of verse ever penned by an American.”<sup>7</sup> For example, in “Goodbye, Christ,” a poem that would eventually cause him a great deal of political grief and that he later disavowed, Hughes wrote:

Goodbye,  
 Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,  
 Beat it on away from here now.  
 Make way for the new guy with no religion at all—  
 A real guy named  
 Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—  
 I said, ME!  
 (“Goodbye, Christ,” 166)

Or consider “Always the Same,” one of many poems from the 1930s that celebrated Marxist internationalism and the emancipatory promise of the Russian Revolution:

Better that my blood makes one with the blood  
 Of all the struggling workers in the world—  
 Till every land is free of  
  
 Dollar robbers  
 Pound robbers

6 Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:320.

7 Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:197.

Franc robbers  
 Peseta robbers  
 Lire robbers  
 Life robbers—

Until the Red Armies of the International Proletariat  
 Their faces black, white, olive, yellow, brown,  
 Unite to raise the blood red flag  
 That never will come down!  
 ("Always the Same," 166)

Far from being a proponent of exceptionalism, the dream of American innocence and unfulfilled promise, Hughes denounced America during the 1930s as hardly a "virgin," "terribly involved in world assignments," "one of the world's big vampires," and a "nymphomaniac of power" ("Columbia," 168). While Hughes published in such liberal outlets as *Esquire*, *Crisis*, *Harper's*, the *New Republic*, and the *American Spectator*, his poetry also regularly appeared in *Proletarian Literature*, *Negro Worker*, *Worker's Monthly*, and especially the *New Masses*, the most influential magazine of the American intellectual and cultural Left. Hughes was involved with the John Reed Club of New York—a cultural front organization of the Communist Party USA—and staged radical theatrical works that called for racial unity along class lines and open insurrection against the reigning social and political order. He traveled to Moscow and wrote glowing reports of the egalitarianism of race relations in the Soviet Union. Jonathan Scott, in his study of "socialist joy" in Hughes's writing, simply and accurately describes Hughes during this period as an "African American socialist writer."<sup>8</sup>

And yet. As the opportunism of the *Esquire* episode already anticipates, Hughes would eventually come to renounce his political radicalism in a variety of ways. Sometimes this renunciation was explicit. In 1953 Hughes appeared as a "cooperating witness" before the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations: "I am not a member of the Communist Party now and have never been a member of the Communist Party," Hughes proclaimed; "I am not now an atheist, and have never been an atheist." Under questioning from Roy Cohn, Hughes claimed he had only the most superficial knowledge of Marxism and the "philosophies of the left."<sup>9</sup>

At other times Hughes's disavowal of his early radicalism was more insidiously indirect. For example, his active participation in left-wing causes during the

8 Jonathan Scott, *Socialist Joy in the Writing of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 159.

9 Hughes's testimony is included as an appendix in David Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear? Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 179–218. See also William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

1930s is written out of his two autobiographies, *The Big Sea* (1940) and *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, when Hughes wrote a popular book titled *Famous American Negroes* (1954), he did not include W. E. B. Du Bois, whose involvement in international and anticolonial socialist activism had by that time led the United States government to accuse him of being an “agent of a foreign principle” and to deny him a passport for international travel; there is no mention of Paul Robeson in Hughes’s *Famous Negro Music Makers* (1955).<sup>11</sup> In the end, Hughes was a much more thorough censor of his own work than the editors at *Esquire* had been. When Hughes edited his *Selected Poems* (1958), he excluded such controversial works as “Good Morning, Revolution,” “One More ‘S’ in the U.S.A.,” and “Goodbye, Christ”; he also left out “Let America Be America Again.”

These episodes from Hughes’s biography—and the larger issue of his disavowal of political radicalism—raise difficult questions for how we assess his political thought, for Hughes was a “political thinker,” even though some—like Bayard Rustin—denied that this was so.<sup>12</sup> Hughes provides little guidance here because he offered no clear explanation for his turn away from the radical Left around 1940. His readers have sometimes returned to this lacuna in his work, offering different explanations for understanding Hughes’s disavowal of political radicalism or his ideological transition during the 1940s from radical socialist internationalism to left liberalism. Some denounced Hughes as a shallow political opportunist who ultimately surrendered to the orchestrated attacks against him on the Right, which were threatening and substantial. Hughes’s readings were sometimes protested; he lost commissions and speaking engagements; he had a lengthy (and error-filled) FBI file that described him as an “avowed Communist” and “a leading member of the Communist Party in this country for approximately twenty years.”<sup>13</sup> He was a frequent target of organized political intimidation by fellow citizens and by the state.

The charge of opportunism, however, sometimes goes beyond Hughes’s disavowal of the Left, to target his broader lack of depth, commitment, or honesty, most recently in regard to his much-discussed sexuality.<sup>14</sup> Hilton Als, for example, writes in a *New Yorker* profile that “instead of coming to grips with himself and his potential,” Hughes developed what he “considered to be a palatable

<sup>10</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 13, ed. Joseph McLaren (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002); Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 14, ed. Joseph McLaren (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Langston Hughes, *Famous American Negroes* and *Famous Negro Music Makers*, in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 11 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 2:412.

<sup>13</sup> Hughes’s complete FBI file is available online: <https://archive.org/details/LangstonHughesFBIFile>.

<sup>14</sup> Rampersad addresses the controversy triggered by his refusal to make a definitive statement regarding Hughes’s sexuality in the appendix to *Life of Langston Hughes*, 2:426–35.

or marketable public persona.”<sup>15</sup> Even such a champion of Hughes as Rampersad argues that Hughes gave up on radicalism not for considered ideological reasons “but as an impractical involvement that endangered his career as a writer.”<sup>16</sup> In his two-volume *Life of Langston Hughes*, Rampersad narrates a youthful idealism and political romanticism that yield over time—and, from Rampersad’s perspective, matures—into a more realistic acceptance of political expediency and compromise. On this account, Hughes’s consistent commitment to racial equality and his critique of white supremacy in its many forms become the primary thread of political continuity across his diverse body of work.

There are elements of truth in all of these explanations, and together they rightly suggest that focusing narrowly on political ideology is not the most productive way into assessing Hughes’s political thought. Instead, it is possible to reconstruct an underlying continuity in his thinking focused on his understanding of the interrelationship between politics and aesthetics, and on the political role he envisioned for the black artist in a society riven by material inequalities and past and ongoing practices of racial domination. Hughes espoused a consistently egalitarian commitment to “the black masses” as both the primary subject of his work and its implied audience of address. If Hughes was sometimes proclaimed the black “poet laureate,” it was because this is precisely how he positioned himself from very early on. Peter Booker has insightfully described Hughes’s poetry as a variety of “urban-based populist modernism,”<sup>17</sup> and Hughes saw his poetry as a vehicle for at once expressing and formally elevating a black populist egalitarianism. Developing insights into the relationship between poetry and politics that he gleaned in part from the work of one of his greatest influences, Walt Whitman, Hughes positioned himself as poetic mediator of the experiences of the black popular classes—those Hughes described as “the low-down folks, the so-called common element”—and of their political yearnings and desires.<sup>18</sup> Like Whitman, Hughes avoided poetic “technism” and embraced the vernacular expressions of “general & vulgar life.”<sup>19</sup> As Whitman had aimed to poetically transfigure the people’s “measureless wealth of latent power and capacity, their vast, artistic contrast of lights and shades,” so did Hughes aim to offer an aesthetic translation of what is already immanent to the experience and practice of the pop-

15 Hilton Als, “The Sojourner: The Elusive Langston Hughes,” *New Yorker*, February 23 and March 2 (2015), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/sojourner>.

16 Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:375.

17 Peter Booker, “Modernism Deferred: Langston Hughes, Harlem, and Jazz Montage,” in *Location of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 231–47.

18 Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in *Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 9, *Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 32. On Whitman’s influence on Hughes see Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:28–29.

19 Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 986.

ular black classes.<sup>20</sup> “There is no longer any need of a bridge between the artist and the people,” Hughes would write in 1937, “for the thing becomes immediately a part of those for whom, and from whom, it was created. The poem, the picture, the song is only water drawn from the well of the people and given back to them in the cup of beauty so that they may drink—and in drinking understand themselves.”<sup>21</sup>

Hughes’s lifelong efforts at transfiguring poetic mediation set the frame for the distinctive understanding of political expressivism that characterizes his work, one that sustains and navigates a tension between the expressive authenticity of a vernacular popular culture and a modernist autopoetic formalism. Just as his poetry challenges “the critical distinction between ‘realism’ and the ‘avant-garde,’” so too does it appeal to inherited expressive tropes of the “black folk” while remaining committed to the “modernist freedom to trope” in its own right.<sup>22</sup> While it is true that “a good deal of the art of the period sought to bring the black masses into representation,” Hughes ultimately came to reject the essentialist expressivism and black cultural nationalism some have associated with many Harlem Renaissance writers’ focus on folk authenticity.<sup>23</sup> Hughes did occasionally, and especially in his early poems, participate in what Diana Fuss describes as the “hallucination of lost origins,” but he ultimately came to understand expressive racial authenticity as dangerously compromised by primitivism and both politically and aesthetically confining.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.

Political theorists typically associate expressivism with Romanticism in general and with German Idealism in particular. In *Sources of the Self* Charles Taylor elaborated an influential theory of expressivism based in Romantic conceptions of cultural and individual self-realization, or *Bildung*, through which a historical people develops its own distinctive modalities of spiritual expression and valuation that shape its collective identity.<sup>25</sup> Political expressivism embeds individual

20 Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” 968. I examine this aspect of Whitman’s political thought in Jason Frank, “Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People,” *Review of Politics* 69 (2007): 402–30.

21 Hughes, *Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, 9:152.

22 Anita Patterson, “Jazz, Realism, and the Modernist Lyric: The Poetry of Langston Hughes,” in *African American Poets: Phillis Wheatley through Melvin B. Tolson*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2002), 206.

23 David G. Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 1. See also J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

24 Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 90.

25 Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 368–93. See also Charles E. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

self-development within the organic framework of this sociopolitical whole and takes the community's collective self-realization as an essential telos of political engagement and aspiration, often enabled by seers, leaders, and poets who are capable of bringing these immanent forms of spiritual striving into full and resonant articulation. Political expressivisms of various kinds have powerfully informed African American political thought, perhaps most notably in the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, whose *Souls of Black Folk* provides one of the most nuanced and philosophically sophisticated accounts of political expressivism written in the United States.<sup>26</sup> Robert Gooding Williams has critically explored the limits of what he calls Du Bois's "politics of expressive self-realization," placing particular emphasis on its false understanding of black identity as a spiritual folk ethos with unitary coherence antecedent to historically specific struggles against racial domination, and its inegalitarian politics of custodial leadership—the paternal political and cultural guidance of "the talented tenth."<sup>27</sup> The form of political expressivism we can reconstruct from Hughes's work does not easily fit the conception Gooding Williams criticizes in Du Bois, nor, on a less explicitly political register, that which might be reconstructed from the work of Alain Locke. Unlike these important intellectual and personal mentors, Hughes rejected the centrality of elite leadership, intellectualism, and political and cultural vanguardism in his political expressivism. He was consistently critical of "race Leaders."<sup>28</sup> The famous disagreement between Du Bois and Locke on the relationship between art and politics—sometimes overly simplified as the confrontation between Du Bois's social activism and Locke's aestheticism—obscures continuities in their thinking on these matters, while also blurring the populist distinctiveness of Hughes's own approach.

When Locke edited the special issue of *Survey Graphic* titled *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, ultimately published and canonized in book form as *The New Negro*, he proclaimed that until that time blacks in America "were linked more by common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common."<sup>29</sup> The cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance would address this expressive deficit. Locke celebrated the movement his volume at once documented and aimed to promote as an example of "Negro life seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination."<sup>30</sup> His aim in putting together this seminal volume, in which Hughes's poetry was also included, was not only to showcase the remarkable flourishing of cultural

26 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Library of America, 2009).

27 Robert Gooding Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 13–15.

28 In a poem he wrote in 1936 (but published later in *The Panther and the Lash*) Hughes derided the political centrality of "Elderly Race Leaders." See Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 193.

29 Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 7.

30 Locke, "New Negro," 7.

achievement among young black artists of the 1920s but to openly chart a course for black aesthetics that broke from what Locke considered the consuming and stultifying imperatives of social and political protest. The very term “New Negro,” as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has shown, had strong associations with political militancy that Locke aimed to dispel. Locke appropriated and redeployed the “New Negro” to be a “poet” seeking the “sublimity of the fine arts,” rather than an activist engaged in “the political sphere of action or protest poetry.” Locke’s “New Negro,” Gates writes, “transformed the militancy associated with the trope and translated this into an apolitical movement of the arts.”<sup>31</sup> Anthony Dawahare has argued that the prominent turn toward a black nationalist aesthetic during the Harlem Renaissance should be understood as a “response to the intense repression of progressive political praxis in post-War America” and the “crisis of political agency” that it represented.<sup>32</sup>

With the flourishing of art and literature in 1920s Harlem, Locke celebrated the emergent possibilities of forms of black cultural expression that were untethered to the instrumental aims of social and political improvement. “We have too many Jeremiahs,” Locke proclaimed. The need to “preach and exhort” against racial injustice had itself prevented the emergence of a voice to “sing.”<sup>33</sup> Locke argued that subordinating artwork to the demands of social and political improvement unintentionally “perpetuated the position of group inferiority” that it denounced, because it foreclosed modern experimentation in new aesthetic forms by deploying the most readily legible and publicly accessible conventions.<sup>34</sup> Locke’s association of social protest art with mediocrity or one-dimensionality would be echoed and elaborated by later writers such as James Baldwin. However, while Locke’s modernist appeal to the regenerative power of new and challenging art, the “tap root of a vigorous, flourishing living,” has often been taken as a form of apolitical aestheticism, he was also careful to distinguish his understanding of black aesthetics from *l’art pour l’art*, which he associated with “the last decadence of the overcivilized.”<sup>35</sup> It is probably true that the success of *The New Negro*, and Locke’s new vision of black aesthetics, “helped Harlem turn its back even more firmly on radical social movements,” as Rampersad claims, but its affirmation of artistic expression freed from the imperatives of the jeremiad was itself conceived by Locke as an invariably political assertion of cultural dignity.<sup>36</sup>

Du Bois published his “Criteria of Negro Art” in *Crisis* in October 1926 as a

31 Henry Louis Gates Jr., “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,” *Representations* 24 (1988): 129–55.

32 Anthony Dawahare, “Langston Hughes’s Radical Poetry and the ‘End of Race,’” *MELUS* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 27.

33 Alain Locke, “Art or Propaganda?” in *The Works of Alain Locke*, ed. Charles Molesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 219.

34 Locke, “Art or Propaganda?,” 219.

35 Locke, “Art or Propaganda?,” 219.

36 Arnold Rampersad, foreword to *New Negro*, ix–xxiii, xxi.



response to the popularity and influence of Locke's *New Negro* and the artistic movement it celebrated.<sup>37</sup> Du Bois directed his essay, which was originally delivered as an address to the annual meeting of the NAACP, to those who claimed that recognition of artistic merit was "the way out" and the "real solution to the color problem."<sup>38</sup> Du Bois argued that while aesthetic considerations might seem unimportant to "group of radicals trying to bring new things into the world," these questions were ultimately essential, although they required "stepping back" from immediate political concerns and setting sights on the "broader horizon" rather than narrowly strategic questions.<sup>39</sup> Du Bois argued for subordinating artwork to the larger goal of emancipatory politics—"I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda," he declared—but he also argued that black aesthetics would ultimately expose gross deficiencies in white American culture itself. Developing arguments made famous in *Souls of Black Folk* about the "second sight" of those "born behind the veil," Du Bois argued that black artists could better discern what is "tawdry and flamboyant" in American life and produce artworks that could serve as critiques of the crass materialism of American consumer culture, while envisioning forms of aesthetic expression that could elevate the black masses themselves.<sup>40</sup> Du Bois and Locke agreed that this spiritual undertaking would be led by a cultural elite capable of raising the people beyond the narrow horizons of their worldly experience.

Unlike Locke and Du Bois, Hughes had a democratic suspicion of aesthetic and political vanguards and of the epistemic authority proclaimed by intellectual elites. He sought vitality and life in the cultural expressions of the common people, which, he argued, could be poetically tapped as a resource of both aesthetic and political regeneration. Indeed Hughes ultimately came to see aesthetic and political regeneration as necessarily intertwined. "Listen! / Futile beauty-makers," Hughes wrote in "Call to Creation." "Work for a while with the pattern-breakers! / Come for a march with the new-world-makers: / Let beauty be!" ("Call to Creation," 135). Hughes's stylistic commitment to expressive egalitarianism and to popular black vernacular culture shaped his artistic practice from very early on, and helps explain some of the artistic choices for which he was later derided by such literary peers and critics as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin: that he was too simplistic, superficial, stylistically plain. Reviewing Hughes's *Selected Poems* in the *New York Times*, Baldwin charged that Hughes indulged in a "fake simplicity" to evade the "difficult simplicity of the experience."<sup>41</sup> It was an

37 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 993–1003.

38 Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 1000.

39 Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 993.

40 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 5.

41 James Baldwin, "Sermons and Blues," *New York Times*, March 29, 1959, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-hughes.html>.

ungenerous criticism that seemed to misrecognize the persistent aesthetic and political aspirations animating Hughes's work.

#### 4.

"You are the poet of the people," Zora Neale Hurston wrote to Hughes in 1926, "and your subjects are crazy about you."<sup>42</sup> Alain Locke similarly proclaimed Hughes the "spokesman" of the "Negro masses." Hurston, who had studied anthropology with Franz Boas at Columbia, knew something about the aspiration to give expression to a people's spiritual yearnings. She had engaged in ethnographic studies of southern vernacular black culture—what she called "genuine Negro material"—and become what one critic describes as a self-appointed arbiter of "black authenticity."<sup>43</sup> Hughes must have recognized himself in Hurston's and Locke's description. "Perhaps the mission of the artist," Hughes had written two years earlier, "is to interpret beauty to the people, the beauty within themselves."<sup>44</sup> He had undertaken this Whitmanian task in his earliest poetry. Hughes's first published poem, and still his most anthologized, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," invoked an ancient continuity of spirit speaking across vast expanses of time, figured as a single river encompassing the Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi ("The Negro Speaks of Rivers," 23). He dedicated the poem to Du Bois. In proclaiming Hughes "the poet of the people," Hurston recognized her friend's aspiration to be the poet of and for "the black masses," although Hughes's focus was less on the agricultural South than on the urban North. During these years and after Hughes would describe himself as a "folk poet" and a "folk person";<sup>45</sup> he also presented himself in this early work, as David E. Chinitz writes, as "the literary paragon and evangelist of authentic blackness." Hughes in this sense was, like Hurston, "instrumental in establishing racial authenticity as a supreme criterion of African American literature."<sup>46</sup>

However, there was also an aspect of Hughes's work that complicates this claim of ethnographic cultural authenticity and distinguishes his expressive aspirations from Hurston's. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which the *Nation* published in 1926, Hughes laid out a politico-aesthetic program to which he remained remarkably loyal for the rest of his life. Hughes wrote the essay in response to George Schuyler's "The Negro-Art Hokum," which had appeared in the *Nation* earlier that year. In his essay Schuyler charged that the ambition of "New Negro" artists to be "expressive of the Negro soul" was little more than racial propaganda in danger of unintentionally legitimizing an ideology of biological

42 Cited in Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:212–13.

43 Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 207.

44 Hughes, *Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, 9:477.

45 See Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, 9–10.

46 Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, 12.

racial determinism. "The Aframerican," Schuyler wrote, "is subject to the same economic and social forces that mold the actions and thoughts of the white Americans. He is not living in a different world as some whites and a few Negroes would have me believe." To argue otherwise and proclaim a distinctive form of black cultural expression, he concluded, "is probably the last stand for the old myth palmed off by Negrophobists for all these many years . . . that there are fundamental, eternal, and inescapable differences between white and black Americans."<sup>47</sup>

Hughes first responded to Schuyler's essay in a letter to the *Nation's* editor, but he begins "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" by examining not only Schuyler's denial of cultural "peculiarity" but the related claim of some black artists—here Hughes is likely targeting Countee Cullen, who had written, "If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be a poet, and not a negro poet"<sup>48</sup>—that the "Negro poet" should attempt to transcend racial particularity to become simply a poet. Hughes argued that behind this longing for abstract universality lurked subconscious racial self-loathing and a longing to be white. The "mountain" of the essay's title is the powerful "urge within the race to whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization."<sup>49</sup> This could never result in great works of art, Hughes argued, because it is premised on a fundamental, if not always conscious, denial of the self and of experience. It is an aspiration and an expression built on evasion and disavowal. Hughes associated this evasion and disavowal especially with the black bourgeoisie and middle classes—the "reactionary, ill-bred *nouveaux riches*"—whose insistence on what we would now call respectability politics blinded them to the expressive resources of the culture from which they were forever trying to escape.<sup>50</sup> Along with the white culture of "American standardization," the black bourgeoisie overvalue "conscious American manners" and turn away from the expressive honesty of lived life. It is "the low-down folks," Hughes argues, whose "expression of their own soul world" is enacted in blues and in jazz, who are free of the subconscious yearning for whiteness. It is through these popular cultural resources that the black artist "through the force of his art" might destroy the "old whispering 'I want to be white.'" "We younger Negro artists," Hughes concluded his essay, "who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."<sup>51</sup>

For Hughes, this meant engaging an authenticity of expression that could be found only in the black lower classes. As he would write a few years later in "Aesthete in Harlem":

47 George Schuyler, "The Negro-Art Hokum," in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David L. Lewis (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), 96–99.

48 See James Smethurst, "Lyrics Stars: Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. George Hutchinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 112.

49 Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 32.

50 Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 32.

51 Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 36.

Strange,  
 That in this nigger place,  
 I should meet Life face to face  
 When for years, I had been seeking  
 Life in places gentler speaking  
 Until I came to this near street  
 And found Life—stepping on my feet!  
 (“Aesthete in Harlem,” 128)

“My poems are indelicate,” Hughes wrote, “but so is life.”<sup>52</sup> Hughes’s return to the regenerative power of “life,” and its expression in the vernacular of popular black culture—his modernist appeal to “life” as a criterion for judging political and cultural forms—is a recurrent theme in his work. In an essay he had written in college and then republished in *The Big Sea*, Hughes wrote, “In the primitive world, where people live closer to the earth and much nearer to the stars, every inner and outer act combines to form the single harmony, life. Not just the tribal lore then, but every movement of life becomes a part of the education. They do not, as many civilized people do, neglect the truth of the physical for the sake of the mind. Nor do they teach with speech alone, but rather with all the acts of life.”<sup>53</sup> Hughes participated, especially in his early work, in what Donna V. Jones has characterized as the broader twentieth-century “racial discourses of life philosophy.”<sup>54</sup> Hughes was also aware, however, of the essentializing dangers of these discourses as they became translated into different forms of primitivism—dangers that Schuyler had emphasized in the very essay that inspired Hughes to write “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Hughes’s close but ultimately self-destructive relationship with his white patron Charlotte Mason was, as *The Big Sea* vividly details, a painful biographical lesson in the dangers of a degrading exoticism and primitivist essentialism.

In “Rejuvenation through Joy,” the longest story in *The Ways of White Folks*, Hughes savages the white appropriation of “primitive rhythms” and the “curative values of Negro jazz.”<sup>55</sup> The story is a parody of European modernism’s preoccupation with the primitive and its impact on American literary and artistic culture in the 1920s. Hughes catalogs the ways that the therapeutic appeal to primitive “aliveness” and spiritual authenticity could become “modernistic” reiterations of minstrelsy: aesthetically updated affirmations of the old racist mythos “that Negroes were the happiest people on earth.”<sup>56</sup> The story might be read as Hughes’s

52 Cited in Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:145.

53 Hughes, *Big Sea*, 306.

54 Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

55 Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks: Stories* (New York: Vintage Penguin, 1990), 76.

56 Hughes, *Ways of White Folks*, 73.

retrospective response to potential misunderstandings of his own argument in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” where he had described jazz as “one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.”<sup>57</sup>

As the last line indicates, the “life” criterion to which Hughes continually returned was not a regained innocence and “joy” untouched by the political context in which it is forged. Hughes’s appeal to “life” was not “a hallucination of lost origins” so much as an appeal to the everyday experience of confrontation and struggle, an exploration of the textures and the contradictory possibilities of living a life of the “dream deferred.” As Hughes would later write in *The Panther and the Lash*: “As a contemporary creative writer living in Harlem, the world’s largest Negro city within a city, it is impossible . . . to be ‘above the struggle’ or for his art to fail to reflect the vibrant circumstances of his life.”<sup>58</sup> Or as he would write in an unpublished note (which was addressed to the work of Négritude poets Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, with whom Hughes shared great intellectual affinity): “A poet is a human being. Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country. Therefore, how can a poet keep out of politics?”<sup>59</sup>

Hughes’s political thought is more consistently defined by this return to the expressive vitality of black popular culture forged in historical struggles against racial domination than it is by his shifting ideological commitments. Hughes’s egalitarian political expressivism is not only found in the subject matter of his work, moreover, but also in at least three distinctive stylistic registers he employed in his poetry and broader writing. The first is his turn to the poetic resources and rhythmic patterns of vernacular speech and his aesthetic elevation of popular idioms. In some of his best-known and most accomplished poems—“Mother to Son,” “The Weary Blues,” “Jazzonia,” and “Dream Variation”—Hughes mined black vernacular speech and dialect not only to expand the subject matter of poetry but to use its patterns and speech genres to experiment with meter and verse. It was a strategy fraught with risk, since by recovering black dialect in the context of a surrounding culture of white supremacy, which prominently employed degrading stereotypes of minstrelsy as a popular cultural form, Hughes courted accusations of stereotyping and caricature. With very few exceptions (see “A House in Taos,” 80), Hughes rejected the abstractions of poetic modernism with its associated elitism, intellectualism, and investment in explorations in private language (although Hughes was very friendly with Ezra Pound). It was partly because of Hughes’s embrace of vernacular simplicity, and his suspicion of the academic quality and

57 Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” 35.

58 Langston Hughes, *The Panther and the Lash* (New York: Vintage Penguin, 1992)

59 Langston Hughes, “Draft Ideas,” in *Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, 9:408.

sharply circumscribed audience of address of some formally experimental poetry, that his poetry was subjected to regular critical scorn as “superficial, infantile, silly, small, unpoetic, common, and jejune.”<sup>60</sup> The critics rarely considered the political dimensions behind these aesthetic choices.

Second, and perhaps most influentially, Hughes attempted to poetically rearticulate the cadences and rhythms of spirituals and blues, but then especially of jazz, into his poetic compositions. Hughes attempted to enact forms of cultural expression irreducible to the propositional content of the work by emphasizing the sounds made as the language was read aloud, duplicating in diction the cadences of popular music. This is perhaps most explicit in the long poem “Montage of a Dream Deferred,” where Hughes sought to bring the improvisations of bop into poetic form. The poem opens,

Good morning, daddy!  
 Ain't you heard  
 The boogie-woogie rumble  
 Of a dream deferred?  
 Listen closely:  
 You'll hear their feet  
 Beating out and beating out a—  
*You think*  
*It's a happy beat?*  
 Listen to it closely:  
 Ain't you heard  
 Something underneath  
 Like a—  
*What did I say?*  
 Sure,  
 I'm happy!  
 Take it away!  
 Hey, pop!  
 Re-bop!  
 Mop!  
 Y-e-a-h!  
 (“Dream Boogie,” 388)

Hughes's attunement to that “something underneath” given expression in the cultural forms surveyed in the poem, and especially in music, resulted in an extended poem, in Hughes's words, “marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances,

60 Karen Jackson Ford, “Do Right to Write Right: Langston Hughes's Aesthetics of Simplicity,” in *Langston Hughes*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2007), 102.

sharp, and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session.”<sup>61</sup> Hughes’s emphasis on the nonrepresentational but meaningful dimensions of black experience conveyed in music participates in what Paul Gilroy has described as the “topos of unsayability” that he argues is produced initially from “the slave’s experience of racial terror” but that also carries with it an important challenge to the “privileged conceptions of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness.”<sup>62</sup> Hughes recognized that the political power and meaning of expressivism exceeded representation, and the deceptive simplicity of his poetry attempted to point beyond the text and the page to elicit deeper and precognitive sensorial registers of response.

Finally, beginning with *Fine Clothes for the Jew* (1927), Hughes began to experiment with personification as a trademark of his poetic practice. Hughes’s frequent use of exemplary persona allowed him to focus less attention on making explicit poetic statements *about* social and political life (as he did in much of the radical socialist poetry quoted above) and more on staging how these conditions are confronted and engaged by heroic everyday figures. Hughes’s most elaborate and popular effort on this register was the character of Jesse B. Semple (nicknamed “Simple”), which Hughes created for the *Chicago Defender* in 1943 and then regularly published for the next twenty-three years. Hughes described Semple as “an African-American Everyman, the authentic, even unmediated, voice of the community that engendered him.”<sup>63</sup> Semple’s representativeness—he embodies and speaks for the “masses” Hughes had committed himself to since the 1920s—allows Hughes to explore political viewpoints that are not his own but that have a compelling internal logic when read within the social and political context in which they were being articulated. Semple’s views can sound reactionary when compared with those of his liberal neighbor Boyd, but Hughes shows that these positions often result in political consequences more radical than Boyd’s “enlightened” view. In his “character notes” to the musical comedy *Simply Heavenly* (1957), Hughes described his popular character as “decent but flawed, optimistic despite failure. He is defined by contradiction, but his fundamental nature is unequivocally simple.”<sup>64</sup> In her insightful study of Hughes’s Semple, Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper writes, “Semple is the personification of a poetics, a philosophy of composition that resorts to simplicity, not in response to singleness or triviality, but, ironically, in response to almost unspeakable contradiction.”<sup>65</sup>

61 Cited in Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:153.

62 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 73.

63 Cited in Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, 47.

64 Langston Hughes, “Character Notes,” in *Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 6, *Gospel Plays, Operas, and Later Dramatic Works*, ed. Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004).

65 Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, *Not So Simple: The “Simple” Stories by Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996).

## 5.

Hughes's argument regarding the regenerative resources of vernacular black culture resonates without being reducible to the oppositions defined by Locke's and Du Bois's famous writings on aesthetics and politics. Locke, too, demanded that art be the "tap root of vigorous, flourishing living." However, he urged black artists to free themselves from the obligation to instrumentalize their work to social and political goals. "To date we have had little sustained art unsubsidized by propaganda."<sup>66</sup> Du Bois agreed with Locke that "new stirrings" were awakening within black culture in the 1920s, but he denied that artistic merit could be "the way out" or present any "real solution to the color problem." For Du Bois, aesthetic service to "Truth" and "Goodness" meant that all "art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists."<sup>67</sup>

Hughes complicated the relationship of artistic authority and authorization, because he ultimately came to emphasize the poet's role in establishing the very criteria of expressive authenticity by which he would like his own work to be judged. Hughes's awareness of constructing the criteria is indicated by his fascination with liminal identity categories like the mulatto and his preoccupation with the performance of passing. Chinitz argues that Hughes's early efforts to fashion himself as the poetic exemplar of authenticity and expressivism ultimately gave way to more expansive efforts to craft "a more inclusive vision of authentic blackness than the one articulated during the Harlem Renaissance."<sup>68</sup> However, it is a question not only of the expanded inclusiveness of the criteria that came to distinguish Hughes's work, but of the extent to which Hughes became aware of—and experimented with—the constructed criteria of expressive authenticity itself. Hughes came to see the authority of expressive authenticity as something less fixed and sedimented in a unitary tradition and more open to poetic improvisation. This, too, may have come from Hughes's own biographical experience and his "ambiguous relationship to the community he chose as his subject." "Hughes," as Chinitz writes, "who was northern, educationally if not economically privileged, self-consciously racially mixed, given (even ambivalently) to aestheticism, and sexually nebulous if not gay, was hardly an obvious candidate for the *echt* African American writer."<sup>69</sup> Hughes's sense of being apart—in Rampersad's words, his sense that he was always "outside the culture he worshipped"<sup>70</sup>—may have contributed to his suspicions regarding the politics of racial authenticity and cultural nationalism and to his awareness of the artist's hand in manufacturing the aesthetic criteria by which such authenticity is to be judged.

66 Locke, "Art or Propaganda?," 219,

67 Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 1000.

68 Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, 61.

69 Chinitz, *Which Sin to Bear?*, 19.

70 Cited in Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:64.



Hughes enigmatically posed these questions in a late poem included in *The Panther and the Lash*, “Stokely Malcolm Me” (1966). The opening lines of this poem situating Hughes in relation to the leading figures of the Black Power movement have him reflect, “I have been seeking / what I have never found / what I don’t know what I want / but it must be around” (“Stokely Malcolm Me,” 561). Hughes’s complicated play of identification and disassociation with Black Power in this poem, as with others from this remarkable collection, emerges not only from the seeking and not finding and the ambivalence of the shared goal—“what I don’t know what I want”—but from the sense that Hughes has over time forgotten the meaning of the search itself. Stokely and Malcolm seem to remind him of that past, but he distinguishes himself from them in the poem by suggesting that the search for an essential black identity may itself be compromised.

I been upset  
 since the day before last  
 but that day was so long  
 I done forgot when it passed  
 yes I almost forgot  
 what I have not found  
 but I know it must be  
*somewhere* around.  
 (“Stokely Malcolm Me,” 561)

“Stokely Malcolm Me” ends with Hughes’s poignant question about whether or not he himself—the former “poet laureate of the Negro race”—could be included in the account of expressive authenticity animating some of the most important movements for black empowerment in the mid-1960s:

you live in the Bronx  
 so folks say.

Stokely,  
 did I ever live up your  
 way?  
 ???  
 ??  
 ?

The concluding questions marks, which repeat a trailing shape Hughes occasionally used elsewhere in his poetry, suggest not only that Hughes’s frequently reiterated “ME” may not be included in the mobilized “we” of Carmichael’s own political expressivism, but that he himself is unsure whether he could be said to

have lived “up your way?” Just as Hughes had indicated a need both to tap and to transcend expressivism in his first book of poems—*The Weary Blues*—and in much of his radical poetry from the 1930s which sustained a dialectical critique of nationalist consciousness, so too in his last collection of poems did he attempt to stage a productively transformative and ambivalent relationship between the poet and “the people.” Hughes’s egalitarian political expressivism remained remarkably constant, and remarkably ambivalent, throughout.

## 17: Thurgood Marshall

### The Legacy and Limits of Equality under the Law

Daniel Moak

Thurgood Marshall is often remembered for his tireless advocacy and stunning legal achievements, and a legacy that also shaped the direction of the broader civil rights movement. Legal scholar (and former Marshall clerk) Mark Tushnet described his impact: “Marshall played a part overshadowed by no other individual in setting in train the modern movement for liberation of black people in America.”<sup>1</sup> Marshall’s acumen in the courtroom opened up new possibilities for black Americans, as his successful court cases provided new opportunities to access the ballot, housing, and most famously, education. Marshall built on these earlier achievements after his appointment to the Supreme Court, putting forth a legal theory that sought to expand the equal rights protection into the economic realm.

Frequently lost in the celebration of Marshall’s political vision is the fact that Marshall’s was only one of many competing contemporaneous black political visions.<sup>2</sup> This tendency is not limited to discussions of Marshall, as commemorations of the very real victories of the civil rights era often mask the heated conflict over how to best advance black political interests that characterized the time period. A particularly consequential division opened up between black intellectuals from the 1930s through the 1960s over the requirements of democracy and the source of, and appropriate response to, the subordinate position of blacks in the United States. During the mid-twentieth century, several black political thinkers divided into two distinct and conflicting ideological camps: racial democracy and economic democracy.<sup>3</sup>

The racial democracy vision identified the failure to fully extend civil and political rights to blacks as a fundamental flaw in American democracy. Advocates of racial democracy argued that until all citizens were guaranteed equal access to the social and economic opportunities offered by the free market, the United

1 Mark Tushnet, “Mr. Justice Marshall: A Tribute,” *Black Law Journal* 6 (1978): 142.

2 Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

3 For more on this midcentury division within black politics, see Preston H. Smith II, *Racial Democracy and the Black Metropolis: Housing Policy in Postwar Chicago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Daniel S. Moak, “Supply-Side Education: Race, Inequality, and the Rise of the Punitive Education State” (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2016), 94–184.

States had failed to live up to its democratic ideals. Programmatically, the racial democracy framework favored securing individual equality of opportunity within the existing political and economic order, and the elimination of segregation was central to this political project. Thurgood Marshall's writings, court arguments, and court victories were critical to the articulation of the racial democracy vision. Marshall not only personally advocated for the racial democracy position but also played a critical role in convincing other individuals—and organizations—to adopt the position. Indeed, Marshall's political vision helped construct a coalition that successfully pushed for significant changes to the legal and political landscape. Given this influence, an exploration of the consequences of his political vision is particularly useful in understanding the broader trajectory of African American political thought.

Marshall's adoption of the racial democracy framework put him at odds with a number of prominent African American political thinkers including Ralph Bunche, Oliver C. Cox, and Bayard Rustin, who at times embraced a more radical political vision: economic democracy. The economic democrats framed the poor position of blacks as an aspect of widespread inequality resulting from an economic system that concentrates wealth in the hands of the few at the expense of the many. The individuals committed to this political vision pushed for a political agenda centered on the extension of democracy to the workplace and the national economy. For the economic democrats, the civil libertarian approach to advancing black interests advocated by Marshall was insufficient. Fair incorporation into the existing economic and political structures would not address the fact that these very structures were undemocratic by nature.

Understanding the divided nature of black intellectuals at the time of Marshall's greatest legal triumphs helps explain just how consequential Marshall's vision was for shaping subsequent thinking on how to pursue black political interests. Marshall's political vision offered distinct answers to the contested terrain within black political thought over the source of the subordinate position of blacks in the United States, the most effective political strategies, and the requirements of democracy. As Michael Dawson has noted, attempts to establish "definitive definitions" for concepts such as equality, democracy, and justice were often the source of the most intense political conflict within African American political thought.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, the broader civil rights community consolidated around the racial democracy framework, abandoning many of the more radical aspects of economic democracy. Thurgood Marshall's strategic and tactical approach to advancing his political vision was critical in the consolidation of a postwar consensus in black politics around a commitment to the pursuit of racial democracy.

Marshall did not author an authoritative text explicitly describing his political philosophy. Thus uncovering Marshall's political vision requires turning to atypi-

4 Dawson, *Black Visions*, 7.

cal sources, including personal correspondence, legal arguments, speeches, journal articles, and court opinions. In particular, an examination of Marshall's work on the education cases for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) reveals his broader political philosophy. This chapter will focus on three distinct phases of Marshall's career: his early years at the NAACP, his triumph in challenging segregation, and the extension of his legal vision as a Supreme Court justice. Although the central focus will be on Marshall's vision, this essay will also highlight the critiques of Marshall's vision from within black political thought that existed throughout his career.

### NAACP and the Education Cases

After completing his law degree at Howard University in 1933, Marshall was eager to use his position and abilities to change the political and social context of African Americans. Charles Hamilton Houston, Marshall's mentor at Howard, had frequently told him, "I am not training lawyers: I am training social engineers."<sup>5</sup> Within months of establishing his practice, Marshall looked to mount a legal challenge against the University of Maryland for refusing to admit Donald Murray, a black man, into its law school.

In pursuing Murray's case, Marshall reconnected with Houston, who had just taken over as the head of the NAACP's national legal team. Houston and the NAACP were eager to take on Murray's case, as it fit neatly within the organization's legal strategy of pursuing equalization of accommodation rather than challenging segregation directly.<sup>6</sup> Under this strategy, the NAACP attempted to force states to equalize expenditures on separate educational facilities—and the salaries of black teachers working in those facilities—or else face the prospect of forced desegregation. Arguing that the state of Maryland's failure to provide Murray with an alternative accommodation violated his Fourteenth Amendment rights, Marshall and Houston successfully sued the University of Maryland, and Donald Murray entered the law school in 1936.

After the success of the University of Maryland case, Marshall officially joined Houston and the NAACP legal team. Using the equalization strategy, Houston and Marshall won several cases that effectively desegregated graduate schools and reduced disparities in salaries between black and white teachers in segregated schools throughout the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> Marshall viewed these court victories as substan-

<sup>5</sup> Thurgood Marshall, "Building a Tradition of Public Service," in *Supreme Justice: Speeches and Writings—Thurgood Marshall*, ed. J. Clay Smith Jr. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 233.

<sup>6</sup> See Nathan R. Margold, "Report on Campaign for Educational Equity," Papers of the NAACP, pt. 3, The Campaign for Educational Equality, ser. A, Legal Department and Central Office Records, 1913–1940, Administrative File: Group I, Subject File—American Fund for Public Service, 97.

<sup>7</sup> Thurgood Marshall, "Equal Justice under the Law," *Crisis*, July 1939, 201.

tial and effective steps in addressing democratic deficiencies in the United States. In an article for the *Crisis* written shortly after his promotion to lead NAACP lawyer in the wake of Houston's retirement, Marshall reflected on recent court victories and acknowledged that "laws and constitutions do not right wrongs and overturn established folkways overnight."<sup>8</sup> However, Marshall argued that the "reaffirmation of these principles of democracy" represented by court victories would "build a body of public opinion in which rights and privileges of citizenship may be enjoyed."<sup>9</sup> For Marshall, the courts represented the most promising avenue to pursue changes in structural conditions and public opinion.

Marshall believed the source of the poor position of blacks was the legally sanctioned differential treatment and exclusion of individuals from certain institutions on the basis of skin color.<sup>10</sup> According to Marshall, this differential treatment based on arbitrary characteristics such as skin color and nationality was fundamentally contrary to the "democratizing aspect of the Constitution," which was guided by the "cardinal principle . . . that all persons stand in a position of equality before the law."<sup>11</sup> Marshall believed that "the activity of lawyers acting for the N.A.A.C.P. . . . has brought nearer to realization the ideal embodied in the quotation engraved over the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C.: 'Equal Justice Under Law.'<sup>12</sup> Marshall's abiding faith that existing American institutions could be made fair drove his belief that legal rulings could be particularly effective remedies in addressing the subordinate position of blacks in the United States.

Marshall's vision was fiercely contested by some of his contemporaries. For example, in a number of articles for the *Journal of Negro Education*, Ralph Bunche offered a starkly different analysis. Whereas Marshall argued that court decisions could be at the forefront of changes in public opinion, Bunche stated, "It is only inadvertently that the courts, like the legislatures, fail to reflect the dominant mass opinion."<sup>13</sup> Given this fact, Bunche argued, "It must be futile, then, to expect these agencies of government to afford the Negro protection for rights which are denied to him by the popular will."<sup>14</sup> Bunche was doubtful of the value of even those instances where courts had handed down favorable decisions for African Americans, noting that the "American experience affords too many proofs that laws and decisions contrary to the will of the majority cannot be enforced."<sup>15</sup>

8 Marshall, "Equal Justice under the Law," 201.

9 Marshall, "Equal Justice under the Law," 201.

10 See Thurgood Marshall, "A New Era in Human Rights," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 4, no. 4 (October 1, 1965): 285–89.

11 Thurgood Marshall, "Equality before the Law: The Cardinal Principle of the Constitution," in *Supreme Justice*, 250.

12 Marshall, "Equal Justice under the Law," 201.

13 Ralph Bunche, "A Critical Analysis of the Tactics and Programs of Minority Groups," *Journal of Negro Education* 4, no. 3 (1935): 316.

14 Bunche, "Critical Analysis," 316.

15 Bunche, "Critical Analysis," 316.

Bunche argued that Marshall and the NAACP's decision to pursue a civil libertarian approach was "circumscribed by the dominant mores of society," which inherently limited its militancy.<sup>16</sup> This strategy, coupled with the fact that the organization relied heavily on donations from the wealthy, resulted in a political vision that primarily reflected the goals of middle- and upper-class blacks as well as wealthy white liberals.<sup>17</sup> Marshall's reliance on large donors continued after he became the director-counsel of the newly created Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF), and fundraising quickly became one of his chief duties.<sup>18</sup>

The disagreement between Bunche's and Marshall's political visions went beyond their positions on the value of looking to the legal realm for relief or organizational funding; the two disagreed more fundamentally on the source of the subordinate position of blacks within the United States. Bunche believed that the political visions motivating organizations such as the NAACP were too narrowly racial in their analysis of the problems facing black Americans.<sup>19</sup> Bunche argued that the economic order of the United States—one that failed to provide enough jobs for workers, failed to provide living wages, and was characterized by an undemocratic distribution of workplace power—was the most important factor for understanding the poor position of blacks. Any political program that relied on the courts was ultimately problematic; Bunche reasoned that "the Supreme Court can effect no revolutionary changes in the economic order, and yet the status of the Negro, as that of other groups in the society, is fundamentally fixed by the functioning and the demands of that order."<sup>20</sup> For Bunche, Marshall's commitment to fight for black betterment through pushing for civil liberties in the courts could never overcome the fact that "the instruments of the state are merely the reflections of the political and economic ideology of the dominant group" and "cannot be divorced from [the state's] prevailing economic structure."<sup>21</sup> According to Bunche, the poor conditions faced by black citizens could be overcome only through organizing to press for fundamental changes to the economic and social institutions of the existing order.<sup>22</sup>

The tension between Marshall's and Bunche's political strategies was emblem-

16 Ralph Bunche, "The Programs of Organizations Devoted to the Improvement of the Status of the American Negro," *Journal of Negro Education* 8, no. 3 (1939): 546.

17 Bunche, "Programs of Organizations," 546. For evidence that the NAACP did occasionally moderate its positions in direct response to the desires of wealthy donors, see Beth Tompkins Bates, "A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (April 1997): 349-51.

18 The reliance on large donors occasionally influenced Marshall's suggestions for NAACP positions. For example, in 1943 Marshall recommended that the NAACP appoint James Marshall to its legal committee, noting that he "controls the Marshall trust fund involving several million dollars—'nuff said." As quoted in Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 27.

19 Bunche, "Programs of Organizations," 549.

20 Bunche, "Critical Analysis," 316-17.

21 Bunche, "Critical Analysis," 315.

22 Bunche, "Programs of Organizations," 549-50.

atic of the tension between different democratic visions. Whereas Bunche pressed for a dramatic overhaul of the nation's economic and social institutions, Marshall pressed for fair incorporation into the existing institutional structure. Marshall believed that the constitutional principle of "equal protection under the law" offered a particularly promising path for advancing the position of black citizens through the courts. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Marshall's position as the head of LDF provided him with a powerful platform to advance his particular political vision.

### Changing Political Context and the Run-Up to *Brown*

After his elevation to head of the LDF, Marshall continued to follow the strategy of an indirect attack on segregation through equalization. Marshall and the LDF were particularly active in pursuing teacher equalization cases in the early 1940s. Despite the frequent success in challenging unequal pay in segregated districts, by the mid-1940s these cases became less attractive for Marshall and the LDF. The ability of states to maintain segregation even after losing in court made it clear that equalizing the salaries of teachers in segregated schools would not be the fatal wound to segregated education that Marshall and many in the NAACP had hoped it would be.<sup>23</sup>

Marshall and the LDF continued to adhere to the equalization strategy in the early 1940s; the goal, however, had always been eliminating racial segregation. Marshall's support for the equalization strategy was largely instrumental; he viewed it as a way of "whittling away" at the foundation of segregation.<sup>24</sup> Marshall had long thought that segregation ran counter to the central constitutional principle, namely, "the principle of the equality of man the individual, not the group."<sup>25</sup> Marshall believed that "individual rights have been effectively destroyed" when the state required the segregation of individuals by arbitrary characteristics such as race.<sup>26</sup> Given these positions, Marshall's long-term goal was to develop sufficient precedents in the courts to directly attack the "separate but equal" doctrine and state-supported segregation as fundamentally inconsistent with the principle of equal treatment under the law. Although Marshall and the LDF did not challenge segregation directly in the early 1940s, he was constantly preparing for "that one case to end all of it."<sup>27</sup>

23 See Scott Baker, "Testing Equality: The National Teacher Examination and the NAACP's Legal Campaign to Equalize Teachers' Salaries in the South, 1936-1963," *History of Education Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1995): 53; and Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 117.

24 Thurgood Marshall, "The Reminiscences of Thurgood Marshall" in *Thurgood Marshall: His Speeches, Writings, Arguments, Opinions, and Reminiscences*, ed. Mark V. Tushnet (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001), 463.

25 Thurgood Marshall, "Segregation and Desegregation," in *Supreme Justice*, 79.

26 Marshall, "Segregation and Desegregation," 79.

27 Marshall, "Reminiscences," 463.



By the mid-1940s, a changing political context provided Marshall with an opening to aggressively pursue his political vision. Beginning with the outbreak of war in Europe in the late 1930s and continuing throughout the rise of the Cold War, the unsettled international context provided an opportunity for civil rights activists to press their case domestically. Simultaneously, the Supreme Court indicated a greater willingness to reconsider the constitutionality of segregation on Fourteenth Amendment grounds. Finally, generous federal funding of the emerging field of psychology provided Marshall with new ammunition demonstrating the potential harm of segregation.

Following the start of war in Europe, Marshall connected the increasingly tumultuous situation abroad with failures of democracy domestically. In a 1940 letter to General Frank Hines, the administrator of Veterans Affairs, Marshall wrote: "The United States is itself on trial as the last proving ground for democracy. The setting up of segregated, discriminatory facilities within an agency of the federal government certainly tends to completely destroy the very foundations of democracy."<sup>28</sup> The formal entrance of the United States into World War II gave this argument added weight, and Marshall frequently cited the inconsistency of fighting for democracy abroad while continuing segregation at home.<sup>29</sup> Eventually Marshall worked the international context into his courtroom arguments. In *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (1946), a case involving whether the state of Virginia could require segregated seating on interstate buses, Marshall deftly associated the racism of the Nazis with the racism of those seeking to maintain segregated buses. In his oral arguments before the Supreme Court, Marshall stated: "Today we are just emerging from a war in which all of the people of the United States were united in a death struggle against the apostles of racism. How much clearer must it be today . . . that the national business of interstate commerce is not to be disfigured by disruptive local practices bred of racial notions alien to our national ideals."<sup>30</sup>

28 Thurgood Marshall, "Marshall to Frank Hines," in *Marshalling Justice: The Early Civil Rights Letters of Thurgood Marshall*, ed. Michael G. Long, (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 59–60.

29 See Thurgood Marshall, "Marshall to Keen Johnson," May 29, 1942, in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 110–11; and Thurgood Marshall, "Marshall to Claude Pepper," January 28, 1944, in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 127–28.

30 As quoted in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 167. The international impetus for civil rights had a particularly powerful effect on the executive branch of the federal government. Just two years after Marshall's arguments in *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (1946), the federal government for the first time intervened as an outside party on behalf of civil rights groups seeking Fourteenth Amendment redress for racial discrimination. The Office of the Solicitor General filed an amicus brief in another of Marshall's cases, *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), which dealt with the constitutionality of racially restrictive covenants. In its brief the government echoed Marshall's international appeal, arguing that the enforcement of racially restrictive covenants was "a source of serious embarrassment to agencies of the Federal Government" and hindered "the conduct of foreign affairs." To drive the point home, the brief also included a statement from the secretary of state, who noted that widely publicized instances of racial discrimination made it "next to impossible to formulate a satisfactory answer to our critics in other countries" and

The charges leveled by Marshall carried particular significance given the broad international scope of both World War II and the subsequent Cold War. As the racial practices of the United States strained relations with allied nations with significant nonwhite populations, they had the potential to damage the international standing of the United States.<sup>31</sup> These developments offered a powerful opening to Marshall to argue for the fair incorporation of racial minorities.

In addition to the favorable international context, changing court doctrines proved to be particularly helpful for Marshall in advancing his political vision. Although the Supreme Court had been unwilling to overturn the “separate but equal” doctrine in 1930s and early 1940s, as Risa Goluboff shows, the court had demonstrated openness to a conception of civil rights that provided strong protection for the rights of workers and labor.<sup>32</sup> The NAACP’s salary equalization cases, in which the NAACP sought to improve the material conditions of black workers in segregated workplaces, fit particularly well with the court’s doctrinal mood in the early 1940s.<sup>33</sup> However, as the 1940s wore on, the court reversed course and began to hand down decisions that eroded the rights of labor, even as it demonstrated a newfound willingness to question the constitutionality of racial segregation.<sup>34</sup>

With the declining payoff of the teacher equalization cases and the ability of southern states to maintain segregation despite NAACP victories, Marshall welcomed this doctrinal shift, as it provided an opportunity to advance his political vision through the federal courts. He noted that although the Supreme Court had increasingly “deferred to legislative judgment in economic matters,” the court

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that “the existence of discrimination against minority groups in the United States is a handicap in our relations with other countries.” “Brief for the United States as Amicus Curiae,” *Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1 (1948): 4–5, 20. Marshall put significant pressure on the federal government, and the State Department in particular. Marshall noted that whenever the State Department accused foreign regimes of violating human rights, he would “respond with ease: ‘You tell us of forced labor in Russia—what about the lynchings of Negroes in Alabama? You tell us of undemocratic elections in Bulgaria—what about the poll tax in Mississippi?’” As quoted in Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 188.

31 See Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Philip A. Klinkner and Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

32 See Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Risa Lauren Goluboff, “Let Economic Equality Take Care of Itself: The NAACP, Labor Litigation, and the Making of Civil Rights in the 1940s,” *UCLA Law Review* 52 (2004–5): 1393–486.

33 See Goluboff, “Let Economic Equality Take Care of Itself.”

34 On the shift in Supreme Court doctrine, see Karl E. Klare, “Judicial Deradicalization of the Wagner Act and the Origins of Modern Legal Consciousness, 1937–1941,” *Minnesota Law Review* 65 (1978): 284–85; James Gray Pope, “Labor and the Constitution: From Abolition to Deindustrialization,” *Texas Law Review* 65, no. 6 (May 1987): 1090; and Marie Gottschalk, *The Shadow Welfare State: Labor, Business, and the Politics of Health Care in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2000), 43–44.

had also “evidenced an increasing awareness of the brutal realities of racial discrimination and its contradiction of constitutional guarantees.”<sup>35</sup> Sensing the potential offered by this shift in court sentiment, Marshall convened a meeting of NAACP lawyers in 1946 to discuss tactics. The consensus emerging from the conference was that equalization strategy was no longer an effective way to attack segregation.<sup>36</sup>

In a significant shift of strategy, Marshall proceeded to develop a legal strategy for an “all-out-attack on segregation.”<sup>37</sup> He formally announced the new approach in a press conference in June 1947, where he proclaimed, “There can be no equality as long as there is segregation, regardless of the so called ‘dollar-and-cent equality argument’ that any persons have raised in the past. . . . The only way to attack racial segregation is to attack racial segregation.”<sup>38</sup> Marshall and his colleagues at the LDF had agreed to no longer recognize the constitutionality of segregation statutes, to stop pursuing equalization suits in education, and to turn their focus to cases in which black students were seeking integration into all-white schools.<sup>39</sup>

The decision to pursue a direct attack on segregation presented Marshall with a new dilemma: demonstrating damage. Winning educational equalization cases in court was relatively uncomplicated, as showing monetary inequalities in educational expenditures or teacher salary was an unambiguous way of demonstrating damage. Fortunately for Marshall, new developments in social science provided him with a novel solution. Generous postwar federal and foundation funding for studies examining the psychological effects of prejudice and segregation had facilitated a decisive shift in the social sciences. This funding led to a proliferation of studies that identified prejudice and attitudes as the source of racial oppression, and found that this oppression led to psychological damage.<sup>40</sup> This new social science literature that focused on the immaterial consequences of segregation in education provided the perfect opportunity for Marshall to demonstrate the damage resulting from even equitably funded segregated schools.<sup>41</sup>

35 Thurgood Marshall, “The Supreme Court as Protector of Civil Rights: Equal Protection of the Laws,” in *Thurgood Marshall*, ed. Tushnet 117.

36 Marshall, “Reminiscences,” 423.

37 As quoted in Tushnet, *Legal Strategy*, 114.

38 As quoted in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 205.

39 See Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 174; Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 124–27; Tushnet, *Legal Strategy*, 114–15.

40 Leah Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice: The Rise of Racial Individualism in Midcentury America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). As Gordon notes, this represented a significant ideological shift, as earlier social science studies tended to point to labor exploitation and class struggle as the source of racial oppression.

41 When recalling the decision to attack segregation in education head on, Marshall described the turn to social science in the following manner: “I went to the basic principle that if you had an automobile accident, and you’re ‘injured,’ you have to prove your injuries—you had to put on a doctor, and the doctor will explain what your injuries are and how you are damaged. So I said

Marshall quickly developed a new legal strategy that would focus on the “insecurity, self-hate,” and “adverse effect[s] on personality development” that segregation caused in black students, to argue that racially segregated schools could never provide equal educational opportunity.<sup>42</sup> In 1947, the same year he officially announced the decision to pursue a direct attack on segregation, Marshall tried out the new strategy in *Marion Sweatt v. Theophilus Shickel Painter, et al.*, a case he considered to be the first direct attack on segregation in public education. In a letter to a fellow lawyer, Marshall described the plan “to produce experts . . . to testify as to the inevitable effects of segregation,” in order to establish that the newly created public law school for black students in Texas did not provide a “substantially equal” opportunity to study law as that afforded to white students at the University of Texas.<sup>43</sup> Marshall was so convinced of the effectiveness of the social science evidence that he quickly incorporated it into court challenges of racially restrictive covenants.<sup>44</sup>

By 1950, after NAACP victories in several cases challenging racially separate graduate facilities indicated the court was open to reconsidering the *Plessy* precedent, Marshall and the NAACP began the process of challenging segregation in public elementary and secondary schools.<sup>45</sup> Social science research played an important role in these new lawsuits, with Marshall calling on psychologist Kenneth Clark to testify about the psychological damage done to black children in segregated schools in Clarendon County, South Carolina.<sup>46</sup> When several lower court challenges to segregation were consolidated into the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the new social science evidence was prominently featured in Marshall’s argument before the Supreme Court. In his oral arguments Marshall stated that “Negro children have road blocks put up in their mind as a result of this segregation” and this “stamps [them] with a badge of inferiority.”<sup>47</sup>

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that these Negro kids are damaged, we will have to prove it.” It was in this context that Marshall and the other NAACP lawyers first reached out to Kenneth Clark and other social scientists. Marshall noted that “Kenneth had been proving it all along.” Marshall, “Reminiscences,” 461–62.

42 Thurgood Marshall, “An Evaluation of Recent Reform Efforts to Achieve Racial Integration in Education Through Resort to the Courts,” *Journal of Negro Education* 21, no. 3 (1952): 322.

43 Thurgood Marshall, “Marshall to William Hastie,” in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 204–5.

44 Marshall believed that the social science evidence was critical to his victory in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, the racially restrictive covenant case. See Thurgood Marshall, “Marshall to George Beaver, Jr.,” in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 236. In its brief in *Shelley v. Kraemer* the NAACP had relied heavily on the work on prominent black social scientists, including economist Robert Weaver, psychologist Herman Long, and sociologists Charles Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier. Marshall used this research to argue that racially restrictive covenants contributed to crime, dependency, personality and psychological damage, and social pathology in black individuals and families. “Brief for the United States as Amicus Curiae,” *Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1 (1948): 61–70.

45 See *Sweatt v. Painter*, 339 U.S. 629 (1950); and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, 339 U.S. 637 (1950).

46 See Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 290.

47 Thurgood Marshall, “Opening Argument of Thurgood Marshall, Esq., on Behalf of the Appellants,” in *Landmark Briefs and Arguments of the Supreme Court of the United States*, vol. 49,

In their unanimous decision overturning the *Plessy* precedent, the justices cited the social science evidence that segregation caused psychological damage to students. In nearly identical language to that used by Marshall, the *Brown* decision focused on the immaterial harm that segregation caused children, arguing that “to separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority . . . that may affect their hearts in a way unlikely to ever be undone.”<sup>48</sup> The decision cited a number of social scientists and claimed that the newly presented evidence from the social sciences was decisive in demonstrating the damage of segregation even when the material inputs of segregated schools were substantially similar. In justifying the move to overturn established precedent, the decision proclaimed, “Whatever may have been the extent of psychological knowledge at the time of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, this finding is amply supported by modern authority.”<sup>49</sup>

The Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown* was a victory for Marshall’s decision to focus on the nonmaterial consequences of segregation. More importantly, it marked a monumental doctrinal shift that established that government-backed segregation was unconstitutional, even in the absence of material inequality. The Supreme Court’s reliance on the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause to overturn segregated schooling represented an endorsement of Marshall’s understanding that equality before the law was a core principle of the Constitution and American democracy. Marshall’s victory in *Brown* reverberated throughout black political circles and galvanized support behind a continued push for Marshall’s civil rights platform that focused on ensuring equal treatment under the law and battling the psychological causes and consequences of racial discrimination.

### Building Consensus and the Road Not Taken

These developments in international affairs, court doctrines, and new social science evidence allowed Marshall to dramatically shift the direction of the fight for civil rights. The vision Marshall articulated in the mid-1940s through the 1950s was firmly rooted in the racial democratic framework. Marshall worked to develop an ideological consensus in the civil rights movement and in the federal courts around the protection of individual liberties from state power, the elimination of arbitrary discrimination, and equal protection under the law. Importantly, Marshall helped forge this new consensus over what at times was fierce opposition from within the black community.

One of Marshall’s most important roles was developing, and enforcing, ideological consensus within the NAACP. This is most evident in Marshall’s policing of NAACP members that he perceived to be undermining the new legal strategy.

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*Constitutional Law: Brown v. Board of Education*, ed. Gerhard Casper and Philip B. Kurland (Arlington, VA: University Publications of America, 1975): 310.

<sup>48</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

<sup>49</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

Marshall's announcement of the NAACP's new direct attack on segregation was not greeted with universal approval from NAACP branches and members.<sup>50</sup> The decidedly mixed reception that this new approach received from some quarters led Marshall to write to NAACP officials about "the urgent need for intensive fieldwork from branch to branch and person to person to sell them on the NAACP policy."<sup>51</sup> Given the tentative nature of support in the black community, Marshall took a particularly hard line against those within NAACP leadership who offered anything less than full-throated support. In one instance, after hearing that some NAACP members in South Carolina favored a separate law school for black students, Marshall distributed a letter announcing: "The NAACP has always been opposed to segregation and all officials of the NAACP are required to follow these principles, and if I ever hear of any NAACP official speaking in favor of segregation . . . I will personally file charges against that member or officer."<sup>52</sup> Marshall was insistent on unwavering adherence to the new position because he believed legal and political victory would require "the complete support of all of the Negroes in these states on the correctness of our position."<sup>53</sup>

Marshall's role in constructing and policing the ideological boundaries of the NAACP program went beyond ensuring adherence to the new program of direct attack on segregation. Marshall also sought to ensure his ideological vision by purging more radical political visions from the NAACP's agenda. This tendency was most obvious in Marshall's active attempt to suppress communist influence within the NAACP. Marshall's anticommunist actions, while undoubtedly driven in part by a desire to protect the NAACP from an attempt by political opponents to label it a subversive organization, were also consistent with his broader political vision.<sup>54</sup>

Marshall actively combated communists within the NAACP after the onset of World War II. By 1943 he was traveling throughout the South warning about the danger of blacks associating with subversive organizations,<sup>55</sup> and the NAACP leadership decided to actively suppress communists within the organization.<sup>56</sup> The members of the NAACP formalized this anticommunist stance at

50 See Thurgood Marshall, "Marshall to Gloster Current," in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 207-8.

51 Marshall, "Marshall to Gloster Current," 207-8.

52 Thurgood Marshall, "Marshall to John Wrighten," in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 212.

53 Thurgood Marshall, "Marshall to Gloster Current," in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 207.

54 Marshall and the NAACP began to face attempts to delegitimize the organization through accusation of communist infiltration as early as 1940. Thurgood Marshall, "Marshall to Jerome Britchey," in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 62. That same year Marshall, as a member of the board of the ACLU, participated in the forced removal of founding ACLU member Elizabeth Gurley Flynn from the organization for her Communist Party membership. Thurgood Marshall, "Marshall to A. F. Whitney," in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 79-80.

55 According to FBI field notes, Marshall told audiences that "they should be ever alert to advancing the cause of colored people, but they should be Americans first and strive for their own betterment secondly." "FBI Field Notes," in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 121.

56 Marshall claimed that the decision to eliminate communist influence occurred when "around WWII, we decided to get rid of them. We wouldn't even allow them to come to a meeting. We ran them out." Marshall, "Reminiscences," 439.

the NAACP's annual meeting in 1950, where they passed a resolution authorizing the national organization to take "necessary steps to eradicate Communist infiltration."<sup>57</sup>

The decision of Marshall and others within the NAACP to fight communist influence within the organization was welcomed by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover.<sup>58</sup> Although occasionally combative, Marshall and Hoover developed a close relationship throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s. The relationship proved mutually beneficial as Marshall became Hoover's informant on suspected subversives and combated anti-FBI sentiments within the NAACP, and Hoover in return provided Marshall with access to confidential FBI files to help him combat communists within the NAACP.<sup>59</sup> Hoover also provided Marshall and the NAACP invaluable political cover during the McCarthy era. According to Marshall, the NAACP was able to avoid the disastrous grasp of the Un-American Activities Committee largely because "we got a clean bill of health from J. Edgar Hoover."<sup>60</sup> Marshall continued to serve as Hoover's informant on potential subversives within the NAACP into the 1960s.<sup>61</sup>

Although some have interpreted Marshall's active anticommunist collaboration with the FBI as simply a product of the political context,<sup>62</sup> it is critical to note that his anticommunism did not stem solely from necessity of the political moment. Marshall's political vision, and his understanding of how to better the position of blacks in American democracy, was one that put him at odds with leftist political activists. Marshall believed that personal prejudice and the failure to extend equal treatment under the law were the main flaws in American democracy. He therefore vehemently objected to what he viewed as the leftist tendency

57 Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle against Racism in America, 1909-1969* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 148.

58 In 1977 Marshall recalled that his anti-communist efforts at a meeting that was monitored by the FBI resulted in "a verbal recommendation from, guess who? Mr. [J. Edgar] Hoover." Marshall, "Reminiscences," 440.

59 "FBI Memorandum," in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 328-30. Michael C. Long notes that Marshall used his access to FBI files to publicly condemn communists and communist sympathizers at NAACP conventions. Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 330.

60 Marshall, "Reminiscences," 506.

61 Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 358. The general anticommunism of the NAACP manifested itself in several episodes in the late 1940s and 1950s. The NAACP openly criticized prominent black leftists including Paul Robeson, William Patterson, and W. E. B. Du Bois, who was expelled from the organization in 1948. Kenneth R. Janken, "From Colonial Liberation to Cold War Liberalism: Walter White, the NAACP, and Foreign Affairs, 1941-1955," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 6 (November 1, 1998): 1083. The NAACP also severed ties with the progressive Civil Rights Congress in 1949 primarily over the concern that communists were too influential in that organization. See Carol Anderson, "Bleached Souls and Red Negroes: The NAACP and Black Communists in the Early Cold War, 1948-1952," in *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988*, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 93; and Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*, 144.

62 See Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*.

to subordinate the “Negro Problem” in their political programs. In a 1950 letter to Louis Lather of the Negro National Press, Marshall outlined his opposition to working with communists in ideological terms: “I prefer to stick with those who consider the Negroes’ problem the top problem and the one for major emphasis.”<sup>63</sup> Michael Dawson has chronicled the failure of white leftists to take racial concerns seriously as a contributing factor for the ineffectiveness of social democratic movements in the US.<sup>64</sup> However, the contours of Marshall’s political vision (and his close cooperation with Hoover) highlights another barrier: many black elites and prominent black-led organizations were not supportive of a social democratic agenda. Marshall’s anticommunism was consistent with his broader political vision that emphasized fair incorporation into existing American institutions rather than dramatic economic transformation.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, Marshall’s forceful advocacy for the direct attack on segregation was not merely a product of changing court doctrines. As Risa Goluboff has argued, the moment that Marshall and the NAACP embraced a direct attack on segregation on Fourteenth Amendment grounds, an alternative legal path more consistent with the teacher salary cases and grounded in substantive right to work arguments was available to him. This path was particularly promising in the early 1940s, in part because relief from the economic consequences of racial discrimination was the most pressing grievance articulated by many black citizens, and also because addressing these claims did not directly challenge segregation.<sup>66</sup> Indeed Goluboff asserts that “the attempts of black workers to build on the labor and economic rights of the New Deal represented *the most politically promising* civil rights issues of the 1940s.”<sup>67</sup> Marshall’s decision to pursue a new civil rights doctrine based on Fourteenth Amendment equal protection arguments against segregation was a choice, not an inevitable consequence of the changing political context. Marshall

63 Thurgood Marshall, “Marshall to Louis Lautier,” in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 273. In his letter Marshall expressed doubt that the communists were truly committed to civil rights: “They have only used the Negro problem and civil rights where it was for their own advantage, and they have not demonstrated anything on which we can rely” (272).

64 Michael Dawson, *Blacks in and out of the Left* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

65 Marshall’s political vision occasionally put him at odds with progressive factions of the Democratic Party that he viewed as insufficiently focused on the “Negro Problem.” Marshall’s evaluation of Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency was especially harsh. In a 1989 interview he declared, “You can’t name one bill that passed in the Roosevelt administration for Negroes. Nothing.” Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 10. Marshall would later proudly recall that he voted for Wendell Wilkie over Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election (Thurgood Marshall, “Marshall to Robert Newbegin,” in Long, *Marshalling Justice*, 339). Indeed, but for their record on the “Negro question,” Marshall may have envisioned himself more aligned with the Republican Party. In a 1977 interview Marshall recounted, “I never wanted all the Negroes to be in the Democratic Party. I wanted them to be in the Republican Party. And we used to discuss how they could get them to come over to the Republican Party.” Marshall, “Reminiscences,” 488.

66 Goluboff, *Lost Promise of Civil Rights*, 111–40.

67 Goluboff, *Lost Promise of Civil Rights*, 9 (emphasis added).



chose this path because it was more closely aligned with his ideological understanding of the problems facing black citizens and American democracy.

Marshall's ideological position also influenced his ready acceptance of new social science evidence when building the case for the direct attack on segregation. The social science evidence Marshall relied on shifted the focus of damage from the material consequences of segregation to the psychological. Marshall was attracted to the emerging psychological evidence because it not only solved the problem of demonstrating damage but also aligned with his broader understanding of the problems facing black citizens. The social scientists that Marshall relied on in crafting his arguments shared his belief that that racial segregation was the paramount problem of American democracy.<sup>68</sup>

Marshall's political vision and tactics in the 1940s and 1950s were not universally embraced by black intellectuals. Sociologist Oliver C. Cox was openly critical of many of Marshall's and the NAACP's strategic decisions to pursue desegregation at all costs. Cox was particularly concerned about the fate of black teachers, a position he came by honestly as a sociology professor at the segregated Lincoln University. In a 1953 article in the *Nation* entitled "Negro Teachers: Martyrs to Integration?," Cox cautioned that thousands of black teachers faced the potential of joblessness with a Supreme Court ruling against segregation. Cox warned that a political approach that focused on "'integration at any price' may work against the interest of colored people," and suggested that "Negro leaders . . . should perhaps curb their zeal for democracy and their anticipation of martyrdom lest they find themselves taking one step forward and two steps back."<sup>69</sup> Cox was particularly concerned by what he saw as the narrowing of the black political agenda to an exclusive focus on segregation in education. He argued that "the right to employment in tax-supported institutions of learning is equally as important as the right to a non-discriminatory form of education."<sup>70</sup> Marshall's decision to embrace the direct attack on segregation relegated the concerns expressed by Cox and others to the background of the civil rights struggle.

Cox was similarly critical of the move to focus on the psychological aspects of racial discrimination. He argued that focusing on these psychological causes and consequences tended to problematically "explain race relations away from the social and economic order."<sup>71</sup> According to Cox, this resulted in a political orientation in which "the social system is exculpated, and the burden of the dilemma is poetically left in the 'hearts of the American people.'"<sup>72</sup> As a sociologist,

68 Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 127.

69 Oliver C. Cox, "Negro Teachers: Martyrs to Integration?" *Nation*, April 25, 1953, 348.

70 Oliver C. Cox, "Vested Interests Involved in the Integration of Schools for Negroes," *Journal of Negro Education* 20, no. 1 (1951): 113.

71 Oliver C. Cox, "An American Dilemma: A Mystical Approach to the Study of Race Relations," *Journal of Negro Education* 14, no. 2 (1945): 132.

72 Cox, "American Dilemma," 132.

Cox offered a very different social-scientific explanation for the subordinate position of blacks in the United States. He maintained that the primary source of black exploitation lay in the broader organization of the economy. Perfecting democracy required a confrontational approach to the capitalist economy, he said: "The greater the development of democracy, the greater limitations upon capitalist freedom."<sup>73</sup> Indeed there was a danger in pursuing Marshall's political vision of equality before the law, as this was a politics that sought "to eliminate only the racial aspects of the exploitative system."<sup>74</sup> Cox and other economic democrats believed that economic exploitation was the foundation of black oppression, and consequently any political strategy aimed at improving American democracy and the position of blacks within it would have to center structural reforms to the existing economic order.

The choices made by Marshall as head of the LDF dramatically shaped the direction of the civil rights movement in the post-*Brown* era. The changing international and domestic political context of the 1940s and 1950s provided Marshall with this opportunity, but these contextual shifts offered multiple avenues for addressing the concerns of black citizens. The fact that Marshall's crowning achievement in the *Brown* case came at this moment ensured that his perspective would dominate much of the agenda of black politics in the coming years.

Through his dogged work in outlining a direct attack on segregation, policing of ideological boundaries within the NAACP, and ultimate victory in the *Brown* case, Marshall shifted the ideological tenor of postwar black politics. Marshall's contention that the status of blacks was due to the denial of equal civil rights and liberties as well as racial prejudice helped consolidate a form of black politics that was committed first and foremost to equalizing opportunities within the existing order. The post-*Brown* legal landscape offered considerably fewer legal avenues for effectively addressing the immense economic challenges facing black workers—including poor pay, lack of jobs, and lack of job stability—that were often at the forefront of black complaints about the harms of Jim Crow. As the victory in *Brown* helped to enshrine Marshall's racial democratic vision as the guiding political vision of the civil rights movement, his influence over black political thought would linger well beyond his days at the LDF.

#### **From *Brown* to Supreme Court Justice: The Expansion of Marshall's Democratic Vision**

Marshall's success in the *Brown* case provided him with a powerful argument to rally support for his political vision. One year after the *Brown* decision, Marshall and his co-counsel Robert Carter wrote an article for the *Journal of Negro Edu-*

73 Oliver C. Cox, "Modern Democracy and the Class Struggle," *Journal of Negro Education* 16, no. 2 (1947): 156.

74 Cox, "American Dilemma," 147.

cation urging readers to maintain their commitment to the NAACP's program, insisting, "It is important the strongest pressures against the continuation of segregation, North or South, be continually and constantly manifested. . . . As much as anything else, this is the key to the elimination of discrimination in the United States."<sup>75</sup> In a post-*Brown* lecture at Dillard University, Marshall proclaimed, "As of the present time, the paramount issue in so far as Americanism is concerned is the ending of all racial distinctions in American life."<sup>76</sup> The *Brown* decision and Marshall's active campaigning ensured that the elimination of racial distinction in education would dominate much of the agenda of civil rights organizations in the ensuing years.

For his part, Marshall continued to press the courts to adopt his constitutional interpretation. In the 1960s he was given new opportunities to press for legal and social change from within the federal government. After brief tenures as an appellate court judge and solicitor general, Marshall was confirmed to the Supreme Court in 1967. In his role as a jurist, Marshall continued to write and speak to audiences in public forums and offered some of the clearest articulations of his political vision.

After his appointment to the bench, Marshall held fast to the notion that equal protection under the law was the central requirement of democracy and a fundamental constitutional principle. For Marshall, the "right to equality" was a basic human right derived from the fact that every individual possesses an inherent dignity by virtue of their humanity.<sup>77</sup> In an article written while he was a judge on the Court of Appeals, Marshall framed equality as having two component parts. The first was equality of the opportunity to improve one's position in society. This component was most often associated with "the demand for equality of educational or employment opportunity."<sup>78</sup> The second component of equality, according to Marshall, was "that differences in treatment be justified and a recognition that certain individual characteristics—such as race, color, sex, national origin, and indigence—cannot justify these differences in treatment."<sup>79</sup> For Marshall, the foundation for different treatment on the basis of race had its origins in "outmoded theories of racial or group inferiority," which had been widely discredited and could thus no longer justify difference in treatment.<sup>80</sup> To treat individuals differently on the basis of these particular classifications was to violate their constitutionally protected rights as individuals.<sup>81</sup> Marshall claimed equality required

75 Robert L. Carter and Thurgood Marshall, "The Meaning and Significance of the Supreme Court Decree," *Journal of Negro Education* 24, no. 3 (1955): 404.

76 Marshall, "Segregation and Desegregation," 82.

77 Marshall, "New Era in Human Rights," 285.

78 Marshall, "New Era in Human Rights," 286.

79 Marshall, "New Era in Human Rights," 286.

80 Marshall, "Segregation and Desegregation," 79.

81 As Marshall wrote, "Our government is based on the principle of the equality of man the individual, not the group." "Segregation and Desegregation," 79.

efforts aimed at “curbing the *arbitrary exercise of power*, whether it is by governments, mammoth corporations and unions . . . [or] churches and universities.”<sup>82</sup>

This understanding of equality had been heartily endorsed by the Supreme Court in the *Brown* decision. According to Marshall, the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown* “supplied the legal and moral foundation for the struggle for equality in America,” a foundation that could be extended beyond the fight against racial discrimination.<sup>83</sup> In a 1964 speech and panel discussion with other jurists, Marshall argued that the Supreme Court had paid increasingly close attention to “the fulfillment of the constitutional promise of equality,” particularly when it came to racial and political equality.<sup>84</sup> However, according to Marshall, the court’s record was less developed in what he believed “represents a ‘new frontier’ in civil rights—economic equality.”<sup>85</sup> As a jurist, Marshall sought to extend his vision and began to articulate a concept of economic equality from a constitutional perspective consistent with the *Brown* decision.

For Marshall, the constitutional promise of economic equality meant that an individual’s economic status could not serve as the basis for granting or limiting the rights of citizenship.<sup>86</sup> This “new frontier” of civil rights was therefore grounded in the same understanding of the Fourteenth Amendment and the cardinal democratic principle of equal treatment before the law that had served as the basis for Marshall’s attack on racial discrimination.<sup>87</sup> Marshall argued that the courts needed a robust and expansive understanding of the ways in which even if laws did not explicitly discriminate against the poor they might place “an unequal burden on the indigent.”<sup>88</sup> This was especially true in the case of legal rights, where rich and poor might both have the same technical rights—such as the right of review, the right of appeal, the right to counsel—but where actual enjoyment of the rights substantially depended on the economic resources the individual possessed. Marshall believed that the Supreme Court’s 1963 unanimous decision in *Gideon v. Wainwright*, in which the justices ruled that states must provide attorneys for defendants who could not afford counsel on their own, was a model of the emerging constitutional notion of economic equality.<sup>89</sup>

Consistent with his earlier thinking about the proper way to advance racial equality, Marshall argued that the judicial system offered a particularly promising avenue of advancing economic equality. While Marshall acknowledged that the goal of economic justice required effort by all segments of society, he believed

82 Marshall, “New Era in Human Rights,” 287, emphasis added.

83 Marshall, “New Era in Human Rights,” 287.

84 Thurgood Marshall, “The Impact of the Constitution and Panel Discussion,” in *Supreme Justice*, 171.

85 Marshall, “Impact of the Constitution,” 172.

86 Marshall, “Impact of the Constitution,” 172–73.

87 Marshall, “Group Action in Pursuit of Justice,” 217.

88 Marshall, “Impact of the Constitution,” 173.

89 Marshall, “Impact of the Constitution,” 174.

“one of the most effective contributions will be that made by the lawyers.”<sup>90</sup> Marshall continued to have faith that the courts and the Constitution were the foundational institutions for the attainment of justice; however, justice and rights were not self-enforcing. According to Marshall, this meant that “if we are to move from a declaration of rights to their implementation, *especially with regard to the politically and economically underprivileged*, large number of lawyers are needed.”<sup>91</sup> As with his vision for the fight for racial equality, Marshall advocated for an economic equality movement led by lawyers and centered in the courtroom.

Marshall also recognized the need for judicial action, and from his position on the Supreme Court bench he consistently advocated for a jurisprudence that protected the poor from limitations on their fundamental rights. In his first written decision for the Supreme Court, *Mempa v. Rhay* (1967), Marshall’s majority opinion extended the *Gideon* decision’s guarantee of rights of the indigent to legal counsel to include posttrial proceedings.<sup>92</sup> Marshall maintained his focus on the discriminatory impact of laws on the indigent throughout his career on the court, even as the ideological tenor of the court shifted and he increasingly found himself in the minority. Marshall applied this attention to the burden that certain laws placed on the poor in a number of issue areas, including medical care,<sup>93</sup> abortion,<sup>94</sup> and marriage rights.<sup>95</sup>

Although Marshall was concerned about the burden that law placed on the indigent in broad terms, given his understanding of the two components of equality, he was particularly vigilant about such burdens in the educational arena. Marshall believed that education was the foundation of equal opportunity and any burden on the poor in this area was doubly troubling, as it treated them as second-class citizens and also denied them the ability to improve their status. When the Supreme Court ruled that Texas’s system of relying on local property taxes to fund public schools—a system that had resulted in dramatic disparities in school funding—did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment in *San Antonio v. Rodriguez* (1973), Marshall wrote a searing dissent. Citing the *Brown* decision in his opinion, Marshall criticized the majority for failing to realize that their decision meant that poor children “unjustifiably would receive inferior educations that ‘may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.’”<sup>96</sup> He accused his colleagues of handing down a decision that put the court in a position of “retreat from our historic commitment to equality of educational opportunity and [an]

90 Marshall, “Group Action in Pursuit of Justice,” 217.

91 Marshall, “Group Action in Pursuit of Justice,” 217.

92 *Mempa v. Rhay*, 389 U.S. 128 (1967).

93 *Memorial Hospital v. Maricopa County*, 415 US 250 (1974).

94 *Harris v. McRae*, 448 US 297 (1980).

95 *Zablocki v. Redhail*, 434 US 374 (1978). See also Tushnet, *Making Constitutional Law*, 94–115.

96 *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 1 (1973). Legal scholar and former Marshall clerk Cass Sunstein has referred to the dissent in *Rodriguez* as “Marshall’s greatest opinion.” Sunstein, “On Marshall’s Conception of Equality,” *Stanford Law Review* 44 (1992): 1269.

unsupportable acquiescence in a system which deprives children in their earliest years of the chance to reach their full potential.”<sup>97</sup>

Toward the end of his time on the bench, Marshall once again sounded the alarm in his dissent in *Kadrmas v. Dickinson Public Schools* (1988), a case in which the court found that a North Dakota law that imposed a fee for the public school bus, and the state’s subsequent refusal to waive the fee for an indigent child that lived sixteen miles from the nearest school, did not violate the equal protection clause.<sup>98</sup> Citing the *Brown* decision and his dissent in *Rodriguez*, Marshall again dissented, arguing that this was a clear example of a “state action that places a special burden on poor families in their pursuit of education,” since the fee “necessarily fell more heavily upon the poor than upon wealthier members of the community.”<sup>99</sup> Marshall asserted that this special burden was particularly problematic: “By denying equal opportunity to exactly those who need it most, the law not only militates against the ability of each poor child to advance herself or himself, but also increases the likelihood of the creation of a discrete and permanent underclass.”<sup>100</sup> Despite colleagues that were increasingly hostile to his understanding of the requirements of the Fourteenth Amendment, Marshall continued to be a strong advocate for a constitutional vision that included a form of economic equality as a civil right.

### The Limitations of Marshall’s Notion of Equality

Marshall’s articulation of a constitutional guarantee of economic equality had important limitations from an egalitarian perspective. His vision of equality was one in which significant disparities in outcome could exist, as long as individuals had a relatively equal shot to improve their conditions and the disparities were not based on what he considered to be arbitrary characteristics. In the economic realm, this meant that the existence of stark disparities in economic resources were not necessarily problematic for Marshall’s conception of economic equality. The relevant questions for Marshall were whether individuals had been given equal opportunities and had been treated equitably by the law. It was not always clear why Marshall considered some factors arbitrary and other factors legitimate and therefore capable of justifying inequitable treatment. Furthermore, Marshall’s notion of equality was largely silent on inequalities that arose after the conditions of equal treatment and equal opportunity were met.<sup>101</sup>

97 *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 411 US 1 (1973).

98 Elena Kagan, one of Marshall’s clerks when the court considered *Kadrmas*, noted that it was the decision he cared most about that term. Elena Kagan, “For Justice Marshall,” *Texas Law Review* 71 (May 1, 1993): 1125–30.

99 *Kadrmas v. Dickinson Public Schools*, 487 US 450 (1988).

100 *Kadrmas v. Dickinson Public Schools*.

101 Cass Sunstein has argued that Marshall was not an egalitarian, noting that Marshall’s notion of equality “allows for enormous variations in living standards,” and that “there is no

The limitations of Marshall's egalitarianism were evident even in the immediate aftermath of the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown*. A year after the *Brown* decision, in a case known as *Brown II*, several southern states requested relief from the court, seeking to delay the implementation of the decision. They made the argument that because the average score of black students on standardized tests was substantially below that of their white counterparts, integration threatened academic standards and should be delayed.<sup>102</sup> Marshall, incensed, responded by pointing out that the reliance on racial averages failed to treat students as individuals and thus violated the Fourteenth Amendment. Noting that "there are geniuses in both groups, and there are lower ones in both groups," Marshall reminded the justices that "no right of an individual can be conditioned as to any average of other people in his racial group or any other group."<sup>103</sup> Acknowledging the administrative problems that might arise from disparate educational levels, he suggested his own resolution: "So what do we think is the solution? Simple. *Put the dumb colored children in with the dumb white children, and put the smart colored children with the smart white children*; that is no problem."<sup>104</sup> Marshall believed only distinctions that were based on arbitrary factors like race were problematic. As his response in *Brown II* indicates, he had few qualms about supporting differential treatment if it was based on a factor he considered nonarbitrary, such as intellectual ability. For Marshall, educational segregation based on ability and achievement was not problematic from a democratic, egalitarian, or constitutional standpoint.<sup>105</sup>

Although Marshall's support for a form of segregation appears jarring, it was in fact largely consistent with his understanding of equality. Marshall embraced intelligence and educational merit as the type of nonarbitrary factor that might justify unequal treatment in some settings.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, Marshall had long

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evidence that Marshall objected to such variations." Sunstein, "On Marshall's Conception of Equality," 1272.

<sup>102</sup> See "Brief of Harry McMullan, Attorney General of North Carolina, Amicus Curiae," repr. in *Landmark Briefs and Arguments of the Supreme Court of the United States*, ed. Philip B. Kurland and Gerhard Casper (Arlington, Va., 1975-), 49:1015-17; "Amicus Curiae Brief of the Attorney General of Florida," in *Landmark Briefs*, 49:883; and "Argument on Behalf of the Attorney General of Virginia by Mr. Lindsay Almond," in *Landmark Briefs*, 49:119.

<sup>103</sup> Thurgood Marshall, "Rebuttal Argument on Behalf of Harry Briggs, et al., by Thurgood Marshall," in *Landmark Briefs*, ed. Kurland and Casper, 49:1196.

<sup>104</sup> Thurgood Marshall, "Argument of Thurgood Marshall, Esq., on Behalf of Harry Briggs, et al., and Dorothy Davis, et al.," in *Landmark Briefs*, ed. Kurland and Casper, 49:1154, emphasis added.

<sup>105</sup> For an overview of the educational tradition and literature that offered the opposite conclusion, see Moak, "Supply-Side Education," 37-184.

<sup>106</sup> In a letter to the industrialist, and NAACP benefactor, Godfrey Cabot, Marshall appeared to indicate that in theory, educational attainment could condition fundamental rights. Marshall wrote, "As to the question of placing educational requirements on the right to vote, it seems to me that if educational requirements are fairly administered, there would be no discrimination." The issue, according to Marshall, was that these tests were almost always used in a discriminatory manner. Thurgood Marshall, "Marshall to Godfrey Cabot," in *Marshalling Justice*, 131-32.

preached that one of the paths of racial advancement in the job market was through outcompeting white counterparts in educational achievement, hard work, and intelligence. In a speech just months before the *Brown* decision, Marshall warned that the elimination of separate institutions would put blacks and whites in direct competitions for jobs, particularly in the educational sector. Marshall told the audience that this would mean they would have to “study a little more,” because “you are going to have to compete with everybody, and you are going to have to measure up.”<sup>107</sup> Although Oliver Cox and others were concerned about potential job losses that might accompany desegregation, Marshall welcomed the potential to tie jobs directly to individual merit. Marshall reiterated this position in a 1967 article, where he cautioned his audience that the way to improve their condition was “to compete in this world” by getting “a brain exactly the same as the other one, and just hope yours is a little bit better.”<sup>108</sup> For him, the distribution of jobs to those that were most meritorious was fundamentally consistent with equality, even if there were not enough jobs to go around. The fact that economic position was determined in part by individual effort and merit meant that it was a fundamentally different category from racial classification.<sup>109</sup> Marshall’s political vision was broadly consistent with a capitalist organization of the economy and the existence of broad disparities in resources, as long as everyone was given an equal educational opportunity and equal treatment.

It is important to understand how Marshall squared his support for distribution based on merit with his support for affirmative action. In his decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), Marshall argued that the continued existence of clear racial disparity on a variety of social indicators could be taken as evidence that individuals did not have equitable chances to improve their conditions. Furthermore, because the racially disparate outcomes for blacks could be traced directly to past state action, Marshall argued that the state was constitutionally allowed to pursue remedies that treated individuals differently on the basis of race. He wrote, “It is because of a legacy of unequal treatment that we now must permit the institutions of this society to give consideration to race in making decisions about who will hold the positions of influence, affluence, and prestige in America.”<sup>110</sup> Marshall’s *Bakke* decision also highlights his objection to the “colorblind” interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment that was becom-

107 Thurgood Marshall, “The Future Lies with Our Youth,” in *Supreme Justice*, 69.

108 Thurgood Marshall, “A Supreme Court Justice’s Warning to Fellow Negroes,” *U.S. News and World Report* 66, no. 20 (May 19, 1969): 93. Interestingly, Marshall’s use of the phrase “just hope yours is a little better” is an indication that intellectual merit could easily be considered just as arbitrary as racial classification.

109 Marshall noted that one of the difficulties in working out a constitutional basis for economic equality was the fact that “indigence may in some circumstances be within the control of the individual to eliminate or to correct; the peculiar ugliness of racial discrimination stems in part from the fact that an individual is being judged on the basis of over which he has no control.” Marshall, “Impact of the Constitution,” 173.

110 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 US 265 (1978).



ing increasingly popular among his colleagues. Marshall argued that to view the amendment as prohibiting *any* differential treatment on the basis of race would freeze existing racial inequality in place and essentially substitute “abstract equality for the genuine equality the Amendment was intended to achieve.”<sup>111</sup> For Marshall, the continued existence of disparities in opportunity along arbitrary dimensions like race could be interpreted as *prima facie* evidence of inequitable opportunity and required a state response that directly considered race in constructing remedies, particularly in cases where the state was implicated in the creation of these inequities. His vision was one in which state remedies relying on racial distinction were ultimately consistent with the establishment of a meritocratic society. However, as the case of segregation by intellectual ability indicates, Marshall’s response to inequalities on what he considered to be nonarbitrary dimensions was quite different.

As in earlier years, the path put forth by Marshall during his time on the bench was vigorously contested by other black political actors. Bayard Rustin, one of the lead organizers of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, put forth a starkly different vision in both its understanding of the requirements of economic equality and democracy and the political strategy needed to achieve these goals. These differences emerge most clearly in a series of lectures that Rustin gave at Columbia University in 1973, the same year as Marshall’s famous dissent in the *Rodriguez* case. Rustin broadly agreed with Marshall’s contention that in the wake of the legal and legislative victories of the 1950s and early 1960s, the focus of the civil rights movement should be on issues of economic equality; however, the two had radically different understandings of economic equality as a concept. For Rustin, economic equality required “a basic transformation of the economic structure.”<sup>112</sup> Rustin viewed the economic order, specifically the capitalist organization of the US economy, as the source of the fundamentally unfair and undemocratic conditions that confronted the poor in the United States.<sup>113</sup> It was the existing economic order that was the foundation of joblessness, homelessness, and massive inequities in income. Accordingly, the political program required to

111 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*. Anna Marie Smith describes Marshall’s view of the Equal Protection Clause as fundamentally a call for antidomination, but notes that this view was overtaken by a conservative judicial philosophy centered on colorblindness in the late twentieth century. See Anna Marie Smith, “Reading Thurgood Marshall as a Liberal Democratic Theorist: Race, School Finance, and the Courts,” in *Education, Justice, and Democracy*, ed. Danielle Allen and Rob Reich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

112 Bayard Rustin, “The Protest Era,” October 10, 1973, Articles, Essays, Symposia Remarks, and Speeches, 1942–1987, by Bayard Rustin, Bayard Rustin Papers, A. Philip Randolph Institute, New York, accessed September 7, 2016, <http://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001581-018-0002>.

113 Bayard Rustin, “Strategies for a New Agenda,” October 11, 1973, Articles, Essays, Symposia Remarks, and Speeches, 1942–1987, by Bayard Rustin, Bayard Rustin Papers, A. Philip Randolph Institute, New York, accessed September 7, 2016, <http://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001581-018-0002>.

address economic inequality would have to address the economic structures that supported these inequities. For Rustin, economic equality required confronting the capitalist system and a transition to democratic control over the means of production and distribution of goods and resources.<sup>114</sup>

Given the differences in Rustin and Marshall's understanding of the concept of economic equality, the two offered contrasting political strategies. Rustin praised the legal accomplishment of Marshall and the NAACP in the *Brown* decision but noted that the victory had come with unintended consequences. Rustin argued that the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown* had essentially imposed the agenda of "the NAACP, with its middle-class constituency" and its "favored legalistic approach," on the broader civil rights movement.<sup>115</sup> Although Marshall's legal agenda centered on directly attacking segregation had resulted in significant gains for black citizens, Rustin claimed that the benefits of this political program were not evenly distributed. Rustin observed that "the new civil rights law did not benefit all classes equally. The black middle class had the financial resources to take advantage of its newly achieved rights and these laws significantly enhanced its social mobility; for the poor, the benefits were far less tangible and much more psychological."<sup>116</sup> For Rustin, the class-inflected nature of the benefits won through the legal approach and the need to shift toward addressing unfair broad economic structures meant that the new economic objectives of the civil rights coalition could not be won in the courtroom.<sup>117</sup> Noting that "the issue of economic democracy confronts us still," Rustin insisted that "our foremost challenge is to keep the issue of economic change before the American people."<sup>118</sup> Rustin believed that successfully enacting the necessary changes required a mass movement with a broad poor and working-class constituency pushing for fundamental reforms to the economic order. In a practical sense, he pointed to the labor movement as the natural home for this type of movement<sup>119</sup> and enumerated several immediate policy demands, including "full employment, manpower development, and the guarantee of adequate housing for all."<sup>120</sup> Both economic equality and democracy in Rustin's political vision required not that the rich and poor be treated equally but that the distinction in resources and power between individuals be dramatically reduced. Moving toward a more equitable and dem-

114 Bayard Rustin, "The Early Years: Building a Consensus for Freedom," October 9, 1973, Articles, Essays, Symposia Remarks, and Speeches, 1942–1987, by Bayard Rustin, Bayard Rustin Papers, A. Philip Randolph Institute, New York, accessed September 7, 2016, <http://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001581-018-0002>.

115 Rustin, "Protest Era."

116 Rustin, "Strategies for a New Agenda."

117 Rustin, "Strategies for a New Agenda."

118 Rustin, "Strategies for a New Agenda."

119 Rustin wrote that recent history had demonstrated that "labor was the only significant social force which could be depended upon to press the safeguarding of social and economic rights achieved through protest and struggle." "Strategies for a New Agenda."

120 Rustin, "Strategies for a New Agenda."

ocratic society required mass mobilization of the lower classes with the goal of dramatic structural changes.

For Marshall, there was no inconsistency between democracy, economic equality, and tremendous variations in individual wealth. Writing toward the end of his career, Marshall clearly articulated his view on this front: “The goal of a true democracy such as ours, explained simply, is that any baby born in these United States, even if he is born to the blackest, most illiterate, most unprivileged Negro in Mississippi, is, merely by being born and drawing his first breath in this democracy, endowed with the exact same rights as a child born to a Rockefeller.”<sup>121</sup>

Equal treatment before law regardless of race or economic circumstance remained the central pillar of Marshall’s conception of democracy and equality, and he continued to believe that the courts offered the best promise of realizing this vision. For Rustin and other black economic democrats, the existence of poverty—and indeed of Rockefellers—was incompatible with democracy and economic equality and required organizing outside of the courtroom to fundamentally challenge the economic order that created these dramatic disparities.

## Conclusion

Several recent evaluations of the legacy of the civil rights movement have at times seemed to echo Marshall’s contemporaneous critics. In an article fifty years after the *Brown* decision, legal scholar Lani Guinier examined the consequences of Marshall’s decision to center the social science evidence in his argument. In an echo of Oliver C. Cox, Guinier notes that one of the effects of Marshall’s decision, and the Supreme Court’s responsiveness to it, was to reframe the structural origins of racism as a problem of individual psychology, a development that limited the direction of subsequent policy.<sup>122</sup> Law professor Michelle Alexander also offers familiar critiques of the civil rights movement in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Channeling Bayard Rustin, Alexander argues that one of the shortcomings of the modern civil rights coalition was the development post-*Brown* of the “widespread perception that civil rights lawyers are the most important players in racial justice advocacy.”<sup>123</sup> Alexander argues

<sup>121</sup> Thurgood Marshall, “A Colorblind Society Remains an Aspiration,” in *Supreme Justice*, 290. Marshall made a similar point about his notion of justice a decade earlier, declaring, “Justice must be available to men and women struggling in abject poverty just as it is to the owners of great mansions.” Thurgood Marshall, “World Peace through Laws,” in *Supreme Justice*, 240. The key point is that in both cases, the existence of stark economic disparity—abject poverty and great mansions—was not a problem for Marshall’s conception of justice or democracy.

<sup>122</sup> Lani Guinier, “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 1, 2004): 61. See also Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice*.

<sup>123</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, rev. ed. (New York: New Press, 2012), 225.

that this tendency to look to lawyers to set the agenda is problematic from a democratic perspective, as it is not clear that the interests of civil rights lawyers and those of their professed constituency are always aligned.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, Alexander claims, “lawyers have a tendency to identify and concentrate on problems they know how to solve—i.e., problems that can be solved through litigation.”<sup>125</sup> The problem with this view, as political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. points out—and as Ralph Bunche pointed out in 1939—is that many of the most pressing grievances for a broad group of black citizens (such as poverty, joblessness, and low wages) do not have legal remedies in the absence of clear evidence of racial discrimination. For Reed, the post-*Brown* focus on identifying illegal instances of race discrimination has limited efforts to develop a political program capable of redressing a broader array of injustices.<sup>126</sup> These critiques, although many not mentioning Marshall by name, are nonetheless commenting on developments and legacies in which Marshall played a pivotal role.

Ultimately, throughout his career Marshall’s pursuit of his political vision profoundly shaped the political direction of the United States. Through his court victories and decisions as a jurist, Marshall transformed constitutional law. His legacy also includes his role in shifting the ideological tenor of black politics toward a racial democratic framework. Marshall’s voice helped shape the understanding of equality and democracy that guided the agenda and strategy of the civil rights movement in the mid-twentieth century. Although changes in political context certainly helped facilitate Marshall’s stunning legal victories, his active leadership in articulating a political vision and his role in building a coalition to advocate for this vision were critical. Marshall’s legal genius and his unwavering focus on ensuring what he viewed to be the cardinal principal of the Constitution—equal treatment before the law—opened up new facets of citizenship to black Americans.

However, the vision put forth by Marshall was always challenged by his contemporaries—and increasingly by present-day scholars. Prominent black intellectuals such as Ralph Bunche, Oliver C. Cox, and Bayard Rustin disagreed with Marshall’s understanding of equality, democracy, and the ultimate source of the subordinate position of blacks in the United States. These differences resulted in fundamentally distinct agendas and strategies for black political engagement. While Marshall pushed for fair incorporation into the existing social and economic order through equal opportunity and equal treatment, Bunche, Cox, and Rustin

<sup>124</sup> Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 225. See also Derrick Bell, “Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation,” *Yale Law Journal* 85 (1976): 470.

<sup>125</sup> Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 226.

<sup>126</sup> Adolph Reed Jr., “Marx, Race, and Neoliberalism,” *New Labor Forum* 22, no. 1 (January, 2013): 49–57. See also Adolph Reed Jr., “The Limits of Anti-Racism,” *Left Business Observer*, no. 121 (September 2009), accessed December 15, 2016, <http://www.leftbusinessobserver.com/Antiracism.html>.

pushed for transformation of the economic order itself. Similarly, as Marshall focused on the courtroom as a central avenue to advance black political interests, Bunche, Cox, and Rustin remained skeptical of the transformative potential of the legal realm and pushed for a broader approach centered on mass organizing.

Marshall's elevation to head of the NAACP's legal team, historic victories in the courtroom, and eventual elevation to Supreme Court are all the more significant given the alternative visions that existed. The very real successes motivated by his vision provided meaningful improvements to the lives of millions of Americans. Marshall's vision, and his role in consolidating much of the organizational power of the civil rights movement within a racial democracy framework, had important limitations as well. As civil rights organizations coalesced around Marshall's agenda of the pursuit of equal opportunity and equal treatment through the courtroom, the grassroots focus and radical egalitarian demands of economic democrats were increasingly pushed to the background.

## 18: Richard Wright

### Realizing the Promise of the West

Tommie Shelby

The enormously influential and prolific American writer Richard Wright (1908–60) was born to sharecroppers, was largely self-taught, and grew up poor in the Jim Crow South (Mississippi and Memphis).<sup>1</sup> At the age of nineteen he moved to Chicago, where he worked as a postal clerk and insurance salesman but read voraciously and wrote poetry and short stories in his limited spare time. In 1933 Wright joined the Chicago branch of the John Reed Club (for which he served as executive secretary), a literary organization sponsored by the Communist Party, and soon after joined the party itself. In 1935 he was appointed to the Illinois Writers' Project, which allowed him more time to write and strengthen his craft. After deciding to pursue a literary career, Wright moved to New York City in 1937. He had an early triumph with his book of short stories *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938).<sup>2</sup> His fame, however, rests on two hugely successful books—his novel *Native Son* (1940)<sup>3</sup> and his memoir *Black Boy* (1945),<sup>4</sup> both Book of the Month Club selections. In 1944 Wright broke publicly with the Communist Party in “I Tried to Be a Communist,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1947 he and his family moved permanently to France, where he joined a lively left-wing intellectual community and wrote several more books. Wright died in Paris in 1960.

Wright had a first-rate analytical and independent mind. He was blessed with sociological imagination and uncanny psychological insight. During his early adulthood, he was politically active in the radical labor movement. Yet within the African American intellectual tradition he is primarily known as an author of fiction. In addition to *Native Son*, he published three other novels during his life-

1 For helpful accounts of Wright's life, see Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

2 Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*, in *Richard Wright: Early Works* (1938; repr., New York: Library of America, 1991), 221–441. I discuss the moral and political significance of these stories in Tommie Shelby, “The Ethics of *Uncle Tom's Children*,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Spring 2012): 513–32.

3 Wright, *Native Son*, in *Early Works*, 443–850, originally published in 1940.

4 Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, in *Richard Wright: Later Works* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 1–365. *Black Boy* originally published in 1945; *American Hunger* originally published in 1977.

time, *The Outsider* (1953),<sup>5</sup> *Savage Holiday* (1954),<sup>6</sup> and *The Long Dream* (1958).<sup>7</sup> *Lawd Today!*,<sup>8</sup> the first novel Wright completed (though he titled it “Cesspool”), wasn’t published until after his death. However, he also wrote a number of important though neglected nonfiction works, including *12 Million Black Voices* (1941),<sup>9</sup> *Black Power* (1954),<sup>10</sup> *The Color Curtain* (1956),<sup>11</sup> *White Man, Listen!* (1957),<sup>12</sup> and *Pagan Spain* (1957).<sup>13</sup>

The primary objective of this chapter is to offer a charitable reconstruction of Wright’s political thought that brings his worldview into focus, indicates key shifts in his thinking over time, and takes his thought seriously as social theory and political philosophy. I say “charitable” to distinguish my approach from commentary on Wright that is largely polemical—that seeks to deflate, debunk, dismiss, or otherwise criticize but without first rendering the target in its most compelling form.<sup>14</sup> Polemical commentary has its place, of course. However, my central aim is not to criticize Wright but to see what we might learn from him, which requires we consider his views in their best light. Moreover, I don’t interpret Wright’s thought through the lens of psychology or explain his ideas in terms some feature of his biographical background or social context.<sup>15</sup> The chapter should therefore be read as philosophical interpretation, not intellectual history. This kind of reconstruction, I hasten to add, need not be hagiographic. Nor is the point to “vindicate” a black thinker, to show Wright is worthy of study alongside, say, Hobbes, Rousseau, or Marx. And my interpretation of Wright, though sympathetic, should not be taken to suggest I agree with all his views, as will become clear in my concluding remarks.

Some commentators attempt to reconstruct Wright’s political thought relying

5 Wright, *The Outsider*, in *Later Works*, 367–841, originally published in 1953.

6 Wright, *Savage Holiday* (New York: Avon, 1954).

7 Wright, *The Long Dream* (1958; repr., Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000).

8 Wright, *Lawd Today!*, in *Early Works*, 1–219, originally published in 1963.

9 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941; repr., New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002).

10 Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, (1954; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 1–427.

11 Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, in *Black Power*, 429–609, originally published in 1956.

12 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, in *Black Power*, 631–812, originally published in 1957.

13 Wright, *Pagan Spain* (1957; repr., Jackson: Banner Books, 1995).

14 See, for example, Sherley Anne Williams, “Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright,” in *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 394–415; Kwame Anthony Appiah, “A Long Way from Home: Wright in the Gold Coast,” in *Richard Wright*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 173–190.

15 See, for example, Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 80–85; and Nina Kressner Cobb, “Richard Wright and the Third World,” in *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 228–39.

primarily on his fiction, even sometimes treating his characters as mouthpieces for Wright's political and social-theoretic views.<sup>16</sup> My reconstruction is based largely (though not exclusively) on his nonfiction. I'm reluctant to rest my interpretation of Wright's political thought on his fiction alone, and not solely for the reason that I am a political philosopher and not a literary critic. Certainly political themes and ideas are taken up, sometimes at considerable length, in his novels and short stories. For example, Wright's fictional characters often give long politico-philosophical speeches, dense with theoretical claims. There is the famous courtroom speech given by Bigger Thomas's attorney Boris Max in *Native Son*. There is also Cross Damon's speech to the communist Blimin in *The Outsider* and Tyree Tucker's speech to the lawyer McWilliams in *The Long Dream*. One can't deny aspects of Wright's political perspective are to be found in such works. But a novel, while sometimes presupposing or suggesting theoretical claims, is not a sustained political argument. Though we can sometimes extract a political vision or social critique by reading between the lines (as I will attempt below), we cannot simply assume these fictional characters speak for Wright.

In fact, in his early literary manifesto "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright counseled black writers to avoid reducing art to politics.<sup>17</sup> Though a social-theoretic "perspective" should inform their work, black writers, he insisted, should not use their writing to convert the masses to a political ideology. The writer is not a preacher, teacher, or politician. The writer should not be a mouthpiece for a political organization. The autonomous craft of writing defines the writer's vocation. Writers are not simply to depict reality (as if they were social scientists or journalists) but must use their own imagination and feeling in the production of art.

Through his nonfiction Wright offers a clear, fresh, mostly coherent, and highly controversial political perspective. While he was a relentless and perceptive critic of Western civilization and European imperialism, he was also a staunch defender of many Western ideals. He believed Western peoples have committed unspeakable crimes, particularly against peoples not considered "white." Yet the problems the West has bequeathed to us can be solved only by Western ideas and practices. "The West," for Wright, is a set of ideals not yet realized (not even in the Western world) but *worth* realizing.

Wright's general political outlook, I show, rests on an underlying theory of historical development. He viewed history as progressive—as a long story of

16 See, for example, Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), chap. 11; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), chap. 5; and Louis Menand, "Richard Wright: The Hammer and the Nail," in his *American Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 76–90.

17 Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in *Richard Wright Reader*, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (1937; repr., New York: Da Capo, 1997), 36–49.



humanity's struggle to control both the external environment and the psychological forces within, bringing them under the control of reason, which has its highest expression in science and industrialization. This theory of history, as one might expect, draws on Marxism. But it owes just as much to Enlightenment ideals, Max Weber's theory of modernity, the Chicago school of sociology, and Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>18</sup>

Wright is more astute and profound when diagnosing social ills or identifying obstacles to human flourishing than he is when explaining the core dimensions of the good society or charting a feasible path to such a society. He didn't develop a systematic normative political philosophy. He did, however, have some core moral convictions, including a conception of the good life, and these convictions structured his political opinions. The underlying ideal he was committed to is of a free, secular, and rational world of equals. Wright considered himself to be perceptive and intuitive but also a man of science and an uncompromising rationalist. He regarded religious faith and race thinking not only as superstitions, myths, and mass delusions but also as dangerous forms of ideology that foster irrationality, domination, exploitation, and violence. They must, he believed, eventually both be swept away if a just cosmopolitan global order is to be realized.

To support this interpretation of Wright, my discussion is broken into four parts. The first considers Wright's theory of the condition and emancipation of African Americans in the United States. The second amplifies the first through a brief look at *Native Son*. The third part examines his account of African and Asian decolonization. And the fourth segment outlines the moral perspective that undergirds Wright's prescriptions. In each part, attention is given to Wright's views on the nature of racism, his conception of Western modernity, and his theory of the psychological consequences of racial domination. I also take up his engagement with Marxism, black nationalism, and liberalism, situating his thought with respect to these well-known traditions.

### The Negro in America

The most developed theoretical treatment of the history and condition of African Americans in Wright's nonfiction work is *12 Million Black Voices*. In his review of the book, Horace Cayton says it is "more than just description; it is a philosophy of the history of the Negro in America and a frame of reference for the study of Negro-white relations in this country."<sup>19</sup> The book charts a path from slavery to the doorstep of freedom. As it is key to understanding Wright's early political thought, I briefly sketch the book's main argument.

<sup>18</sup> See George E. Kent, *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture* (Chicago: Third World, 1972), 76–97; Carla Cappetti, "Sociology of an Existence: Richard Wright and the Chicago School," *Black American Literature* 12 (1985): 25–43.

<sup>19</sup> Horace Cayton, "Wright's New Book More than a Study of Social Status," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 15, 1941.

According to Wright, black peoples of the West were created by slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, “a weird and paradoxical birth.”<sup>20</sup> The slave trade and Middle Passage constituted a kind of spiritual death, destroying the African tribal identities of the enslaved. White colonialists, and in particular the white landholding class (whom Wright calls “Lords of the Land”), were caught in an irreconcilable contradiction between their commitment to liberty and their practice of slavery. Yet landowners were progressive insofar as they were leaving much of feudalism behind (particularly superstition and social rank by birth) and embracing Enlightenment ideals of reason, science, and technology.

Wright explains that slave traders and slaveholders were motivated by profit and the need to secure labor for the production of cash crops for a global market. Racial ideology and Christian dogma were used to justify this bondage and to pit the white poor against black slaves.<sup>21</sup> Black-white relations were subsequently shaped by white paternalism and white cruelty, which are both a living cultural legacy of slavery and its ideology.<sup>22</sup> But growth in technology (the industrializing force that is machine-based production), aided by land made infertile by over-use, would ultimately destroy the world of slavery and scatter black folk across the nation, mostly to growing cities.<sup>23</sup> Enter the “Bosses of the Buildings,” the Northern finance capitalists and industrialists. Their mode of production was at odds with the Lords of the Land. Thus it was inevitable that these two worlds (the “world of machines” and the “world of slaves”) and these two elite classes (Bosses of the Buildings and Lords of the Land) would find themselves in conflict. Though these white elites clashed, they were in accord that blacks must either emigrate or remain subordinate. Neither group was willing to accept blacks as equal citizens in the United States.

Wright emphasizes the degrading sociopsychological consequences for blacks living under Jim Crow. For example, he laments the necessity to perform servility for fear of violent reprisal and the need to guide one’s conduct by anticipating what whites will find acceptable and nonthreatening.<sup>24</sup> These imperatives created an undignified culture of dissembling.<sup>25</sup> To openly protest was to court torture, then death, usually at the hands of poor whites, who generally accepted the ideology of white supremacy. Fear of the white mob and reluctance to retaliate engender self-loathing and recrimination among blacks.<sup>26</sup> Under these oppressive conditions, black religion functions primarily as comfort, hope, and escape. It also softens resentment and indignation and eases psychological pain.<sup>27</sup>

20 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 12.

21 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 16–17, 24–25.

22 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 18, 49.

23 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 25.

24 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 35.

25 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 41–43.

26 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 46–47.

27 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 67–73. These consequences of oppression under the Southern segregation regime are vividly dramatized in *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *The Long Dream*.

Within the racialized class structure of postslavery US society, there were actually three classes of whites—landowners, bankers and industrialists, and poor white workers.<sup>28</sup> The masses of blacks had to compete with white workers to survive. Economic and political powerlessness made blacks vulnerable to exploitation from southern landowners. White landowners persuaded poor whites that they were a part of a great white race destined to rule over darker mankind, thus undermining interracial working-class unity and leaving both black and white workers poor and exploited.<sup>29</sup>

Technology in agriculture made sharecropping obsolete and created the day laborer and the migrant worker.<sup>30</sup> The Great Migration (after World War I) was spurred by the demand for labor in the North, supplemented by the black press's characterization of the North as a land of promise.<sup>31</sup> But the black migrants weren't ready for city life in the North.<sup>32</sup> Their families were weak. They still relied heavily on religious ritual and superstition. They had no wealth or property to speak of. They had limited understanding of modern commercial life with its unforgiving, cold cash nexus. The speed and ethnic diversity of city life were alien. They had no experience with political or civic organizations besides churches and burial societies. Their personalities had been distorted by decades of bondage and backward racialized feudal norms, making them ignorant, naive, and fearful of whites.

Poor European immigrants were able to adapt to urban social organization and to achieve some limited upward mobility. But blacks from the South were not. Wright gives a complex two-part explanation for this. First, with limited skills, black migrants were restricted to manual labor and domestic work with no possibility for advancement. White immigrants had skills appropriate for the industrial age. Vocational and professional schools refused to train blacks in the higher skills and trades. White workers wouldn't allow blacks to join their unions, wanted to keep the best-paid work for themselves, yet hated blacks for being strikebreakers and lowering white wages. In addition to being paid low wages, black workers were forced to do the heaviest, dirtiest, and most dangerous work.<sup>33</sup> This conflict between white and black workers was to the advantage of their employers, and thus they encouraged and exploited the antagonism.<sup>34</sup>

Second, whites refused to live among blacks, creating complex forms of residential segregation in ghettos. The Bosses of the Buildings instigated and profited from white racism in the housing market. Wright focused on the urban "kitchen-

28 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 35.

29 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 46–47.

30 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 79.

31 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 86–87.

32 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 93–100.

33 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 118.

34 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 119.

ette” to explain the housing situation of new black migrants. A kitchenette is a one-room apartment with a small gas stove and single sink. Kitchenettes were created by carving up a larger apartment previously inhabited by white families. Those living in a kitchenette shared a bathroom with several other residents. These overpriced and overcrowded apartments were, in Wright’s words, “our prison, our death sentence without trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks.”<sup>35</sup> The kitchenette breeds and fosters disease. It invites crime. It destroys families. The concentration of the disadvantaged and the discontent caused conflict and violence.

The “kitchenette” described with such verve and lyricism in *12 Million Black Voices* also serves as a metaphor for racial oppression. Indeed Wright opens *Native Son* with a scene in a cramped kitchenette, where Bigger kills a defiant “huge black rat” and his mother prophesies that Bigger will meet his fate at “the gallows.”<sup>36</sup> As foreshadowed in this scene, the novel ends with Bigger in jail awaiting his execution. In America the kitchenette and the jail cell serve essentially the same function—they are instruments of oppression used to isolate and contain a subjugated group and, often, to torture and kill its expendable members.

Those few blacks with resources to buy their own homes faced discrimination and hostility from white homeowners and neighbors. When blacks did manage to move into white neighborhoods, the whites abandoned their homes, which were then sold to blacks by capitalists at exploitative prices. Restrictive covenants were created in white neighborhoods to keep blacks out, forcing most blacks to reside in racially segregated and deeply disadvantaged neighborhoods. In these restricted black areas, schools were inadequately funded and public services were substandard.

Despite these many constraints and obstacles, black men underwent a modernizing acculturation through industrial labor: “But it is in industry that we encounter experiences that tend to break down the structure of our folk characters and project us toward the vortex of modern urban life. It is when we are handling picks rather than mops, it is when we are swinging hammers rather than brooms, it is when we are pushing levers rather than dust-cloths that we are gripped and influenced by the world-wide forces that shape and mold the life of Western civilization.”<sup>37</sup> However, black women, restricted as they were to domestic work, tended to be further removed from a modern outlook and way of life. As Wright remarks, “More than even that of the American Indian, the consciousness of vast sections of our black women lies beyond the boundaries of the modern world, though they live and work in that world daily.”<sup>38</sup> Black women were also, Wright claimed, more attached to the church, as it was one of the few arenas available to

35 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 106.

36 Wright, *Native Son*, 447–55.

37 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 117.

38 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 135.

them for self-expression and emotional release. Black women were more severely oppressed than black men, as sexism, along with racism and class exploitation, left them “triply anchored and restricted in their movements within and without the Black Belts.”<sup>39</sup>

Notwithstanding this bleak diagnosis of the black condition in America, Wright did not embrace black nationalism. He did not endorse the program of self-determination in a sovereign territory within the American South, as many of his communist comrades, like Harry Haywood, advocated.<sup>40</sup> He accepted neither solidarity among the “darker races” of the world as a united front against global white supremacy nor socioeconomic cooperation between the black elite and the black working class, two positions W. E. B. Du Bois had defended.<sup>41</sup> Wright also rejected Marcus Garvey’s “Back-to-Africa” scheme, which Wright regarded as embodying a “totally racialistic outlook.”<sup>42</sup> The goal of building a black nation-state in Africa was not feasible, both because Africa was in the tight grip of European colonial powers and because there was an unbridgeable cultural divide between blacks of the Diaspora (who are Western, modern, proletarian) and those on the African continent (who are pagan, primitive, peasants).

Wright was well aware the black masses were sometimes attracted to black nationalist ideas.<sup>43</sup> But he maintained that black people’s distinctive and largely separate way of life was not freely chosen but a response to white supremacy and Jim Crow. Blacks don’t want to live separately, but they don’t want to submit to white power either. So they have built up institutions to enable their survival and to allow outlets for self-expression. While black life and institutions were in many ways inadequate and truncated, black progress had to be sought through them. Wright didn’t think black intellectuals should embrace black nationalism, though. They had to understand it and to some extent participate in its practices. But the goal is to *transform* nationalist thinking and practice into revolutionary thought and militant collective action. Black nationalism is, at best, a necessary starting point (and a deeply flawed one).<sup>44</sup>

Wright was convinced the Great Depression had created new opportunities for

39 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 131.

40 Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation* (Chicago: Liberator, 1976).

41 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1984).

42 Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 273.

43 Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” 100–101.

44 This interpretation of Wright’s engagement with black nationalism differs from that offered in Robinson, *Black Marxism*, chap. 11. Robinson describes Wright’s intellectual journey as one that “took him from Marxism, and through Existentialism, and finally to Black nationalism” (289). He sees Wright as ultimately committed to revolutionary black nationalism, a synthesis of Marxism and black nationalism. As a reading of Wright’s “Blueprint” essay, Robinson’s interpretation has some textual basis (though even in that early essay Wright speaks of black nationalism as something to be “transcended”), but it doesn’t fit Wright’s later writings, not even *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1945).

interracial working-class unity. Slowly, white and black workers were coming to see their common interests. White workers had been rendered destitute, and their only hope against the capitalist classes was to admit blacks to their unions and labor organizations, which they ultimately did. Black workers came to overcome their fear of white capitalists, standing up to them in defiance, and became more trusting of white workers. The key to this change was the modernizing force of industrial life, which caused the withering away of a backward feudal culture: "In this way we encountered for the first time in our lives the full effect of those forces that tended to reshape our folk consciousness, and a few of us stepped forth and accepted within the confines of our personalities the death of our old folk lives, an acceptance of a death that enabled us to cross class and racial lines, a death that made us free."<sup>45</sup> Blacks had to travel the path of Western civilization—from a primitive semifeudal existence to modern industrial life—but with tremendous speed and, tragically, through force.<sup>46</sup> Having become agents of "conscious history," the black masses were ready to take their place alongside white workers in the collective project of creating a shared life on American soil on terms of freedom and equality.

Sometime during the early 1940s, however, Wright soured on the Communist Party, a disillusionment described in detail in the second part of his memoir *Black Boy* (which was published in full only after his death). Initially he seems to have seen his vocation as a revolutionary artist who would help the communists understand the inner life of common black folk, teach his comrades to speak a language the black masses could relate to, and build trust among black people in the communists' program.<sup>47</sup> The "glory" of communism, its greatest virtue, is its welding of diverse peoples, across lines of race and nationality, into a unified revolutionary force.<sup>48</sup> But where there is solidarity, there is the ever-present threat of betrayal—the worry that a would-be comrade is actually a traitor to the cause. And the communists did not have the wisdom to distinguish friend from foe. This ignorance and suspicion, combined with intolerance for independent thinking and fear of new ideas, was the "horror" of party life, and Wright found it unbearable, in part because he was frequently its victim.

The Marxist theory of history, with its emphasis on the explanatory power of material conditions, got many things right. But, so Wright thought, it failed to appreciate the sociopsychological dimensions of historical development. The labor movement mistakenly regarded the Negro problem as simply one of economic exploitation and class conflict. But there are racial and cultural dimensions to this problem, and there are dimensions to the problem that are peculiar to the American context. In the introductory essay to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black*

45 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 144.

46 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 145.

47 Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 305–6.

48 Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 356–57.

*Metropolis*, Wright claimed that America is divided by “a war of impulses.”<sup>49</sup> On the one hand, it is committed to reason and freedom as universal values, but on the other hand, it is committed to an irrational belief in white domination over “inferior” peoples. These two impulses cannot be reconciled. The ideology of black inferiority, invented to justify slavery and segregation in a world where each individual is supposed to have inherent dignity, cannot do the job. This is Gunnar Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* argument, which *Black Metropolis* is said to endorse and supplement.<sup>50</sup>

The break with the feudal order was caused by secularization and industrialization, which all but destroyed traditional kinship bonds and religious worldviews. There resulted a deep loss of meaning and purpose in life, causing many to still cling to the obsolete and irrational values of the feudal past, giving rise to a second war of impulses. In other words, Americans were divided within themselves because the meaning of their lives (including its emotional resonance) is rooted in the bygone era of feudalism, which has been crushed under the iron wheels of modern industrialization. This “emotional void” theory is, I believe, an attempt to integrate Weber’s story of modern alienation and disenchantment with Marx’s historical materialism.

Blacks who migrated to urban centers in search of opportunity initially retained the old hope for freedom. But what happens when they discover the freedom they seek cannot be realized in a racist capitalist society? Their frustration, their “hopeless hope” as Wright calls it, will be exploited by fascists and communists or find release in alienated violent rebellion.<sup>51</sup> Wright insisted whites do not understand the realities of Negro life and certainly don’t grasp the inner workings of the black mind (which is shaped by repression and its symptoms), and so they will be surprised by blacks’ violent responses to their plight, even as riots are already happening.

Ultimately, Wright decided to leave the United States and to make his home in France. In the revealing essay “I Choose Exile” (written for the magazine *Ebony* but never published), he explained the reasons behind his decision to emigrate.<sup>52</sup> The essay is not only a Dear John letter to America but also a *lettre d’amore* to European liberalism. He admits he desires to escape American racism and segregation, but his main reason for exiting the American scene is that Europeans value the individual above money and respect individual liberty. He complains that in America the capitalist ethos dominates the whole of life, marginalizing all other motives and ways of living; and despite the country’s high-minded constitutional principles, it does not respect freedom or tolerate difference. The essay strikes a

49 Richard Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton (New York: Hartcourt, Brace, 1945), xxi.

50 Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xxix.

51 Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xxvi.

52 Wright, “I Choose Exile” (unpublished manuscript, 1951).

pessimistic, even defeatist, note about the future of blacks in America: "My first week in Paris taught me that the fight I had made back home for Negro rights was right, but somehow futile. The deep contrast between French and American racial attitudes demonstrated that it was barbarousness that incited such militant racism in white Americans."

### ***Native Son* and the Meaning of "Bigger"**

Can *Native Son* shed light on Wright's political thought? In particular, how much (if any) of Max's notoriously long courtroom speech can be attributed to Wright?<sup>53</sup> What is the political significance of Wright's most famous literary character? These are difficult questions that have only controversial answers, and I won't attempt a comprehensive account of the political lessons of *Native Son*. But given the high place of that novel in black letters and American literature more broadly, some discussion is apt.

First, it's worth noting that many of Max's claims in his courtroom oration can be found in some of Wright's nonfiction works. For example, Max declares his courtroom plea to have significance for the future of the nation as a whole, not just for Bigger or the black people.<sup>54</sup> Bigger is a symbol for a complex set of social forces, a social pathology at the heart of US life.<sup>55</sup> Wright repeats such claims in his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, where he asserts, "There is a problem facing us, a bigger one than even that of the Negro, a problem of which the Negro problem is a small but a highly symbolically important part."<sup>56</sup> Max also explicitly endorses Wright's explanation of the fall of slavery in *12 Million Black Voices*: "The invention and widespread use of machines made the further direct enslavement of men economically impossible, and so slavery ended."<sup>57</sup> And Max does not depart from Wright's views when he suggests that because of repression of resentment and loss of hope, more violence of the sort Bigger committed can be expected, and if drastic measures aren't taken immediately, mass violence will erupt that will threaten Western civilization itself.<sup>58</sup> Where Max's argument supports statements Wright makes in his own voice elsewhere, we have some reason to attribute these arguments to Wright himself.

Second, there is of course Bigger Thomas, the main character of the novel, who also expresses, in his own way, positions Wright defends elsewhere. For instance, one cannot fail to notice that Bigger's attitudes toward religion can be found in Wright's nonfiction work. There are several striking scenes about Christianity to

53 See Wright, *Native Son*, 803–26.

54 Wright, *Native Son*, 803.

55 Wright, *Native Son*, 804.

56 Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xxi.

57 Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 810.

58 See Wright, *Native Son*, 823.



be found in *Native Son*. Despite facing the death penalty and his mother's desperate pleas for him to turn to the Lord, Bigger denies God's existence, the efficacy of prayer, and a life after death.<sup>59</sup> When Max asks Bigger why he didn't seek a sense of "home" in black churches, he replies, "I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it. I didn't want that kind of happiness. The white folks like for us to be religious, then they can do what they want to with us."<sup>60</sup> In another scene Bigger symbolically rejects the call of the gospel by angrily throwing away, three times, a necklace with a cross charm.<sup>61</sup> And if the point wasn't already clear, Bigger tosses hot coffee in the face of a priest who had come to pray with him after he'd been sentenced to death, and as a result of this aggressive act, feels a sense of self-worth for having refused "the consolations of religion."<sup>62</sup>

Less than two weeks after the publication of *Native Son*, Wright delivered a lecture at Columbia University titled "How 'Bigger' Was Born," which was included as an essay in subsequent printings of the novel.<sup>63</sup> Wright explains that Bigger Thomas represented a personality type he knew well from his time growing up in Mississippi and his early adult life in Chicago. There are, he insists, millions of "Biggers," some black, some white. To give a concrete sense of the type he has in mind, Wright describes five Biggers he had known. Biggers are "bad," violent, unremorseful, and full of resentment; their violence can be directed toward the oppressor or the oppressed (consider Bigger's murder of Bessie). Refusing to live without the things the privileged possess, Biggers take what they want without regard for whether their actions are right or wrong. They are not afraid of conflict, not even violent confrontation, and are prepared to risk their lives to satisfy their desires. Biggers are eager to break the rules and willing to suffer the consequences. But they are also, Wright notes, prone to depression and mental illness. And their lives typically come to a violent end. Despite this grim characterization, Wright confesses he identifies with the Bigger type<sup>64</sup> and secretly desires to act like a Bigger but is too timid to do so.<sup>65</sup> And, importantly, he claims the only acts of rebellion he ever saw from blacks in the South were carried out by Biggers.<sup>66</sup>

Wright is concerned to explain that Biggers are not naturally "bad" but are creatures of their environment.<sup>67</sup> They live in a segregated world, deprived of political and economic power and humiliated by Jim Crow prohibitions and taboos. They are not permitted to acquire a decent education and are prevented from occupying good jobs or honorable public roles. A reigning ideology of white

59 Wright, *Native Son*, 724–26, 778–79.

60 Wright, *Native Son*, 778.

61 Wright, *Native Son*, 760–63.

62 Wright, *Native Son*, 839.

63 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," in *Early Works*, 851–81.

64 Wright, *Native Son*, 874.

65 Wright, *Native Son*, 855.

66 Wright, *Native Son*, 859.

67 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 857–59.

supremacy is used against them to justify retaliation for breaking the regime's rules. All these practices are instruments for keeping blacks "in their place"—subordinated to whites. Some blacks adapted to these oppressive circumstances through religion. However, the Biggers, having rejected the "compensatory nourishment" of religion and frustrated at being denied the benefits of modern industrial life, could only revolt.

Max also voices this point of view in his courtroom defense of Thomas. He explains that hate and fear have been molded into Bigger's consciousness by white civilization. In search of some way to express these emotions, he and others like him are in a constant state of spontaneous protest, even rebellion.<sup>68</sup> He insists that killing a person like Bigger will not make whites any safer or stamp out the way of life he represents. Killing Bigger or others like him will only tighten the grip of oppression, unleashing an even longer and less controllable violent response.<sup>69</sup> Max argues that religion, gambling, and sex function as truncated modes of escape from the crushing force of oppression, redirecting rebellious energy. Otherwise there would be many more like Bigger.<sup>70</sup> A refrain in the speech is that the oppressed resent that their interests are treated as unimportant and that they are denied opportunities others have to pursue their ambitions. The memorable phrase used is "the resentful millions."<sup>71</sup>

The plot of *Native Son*, according to Wright, is simply the story of what made Bigger who he is and the significance of his social type.<sup>72</sup> He insists, "From start to finish, [*Native Son*] was Bigger's story, Bigger's fear, Bigger's flight, and Bigger's fate that I tried to depict."<sup>73</sup> But Wright wouldn't have gone to the trouble to write Bigger's story if the character were not "a meaningful and prophetic symbol."<sup>74</sup> Wright tells us, "I am not saying that I heard any talk of revolution in the South when I was a kid there. But I did hear the lispings, the whispers, the mutters which some day, under one stimulus or another, will surely grow into open revolt unless the conditions which produce Bigger Thomases are changed."<sup>75</sup>

Surprisingly, Wright says almost nothing in "How 'Bigger' Was Born" about the character Max. He mentions that "the lawyer's speech" and Max's presence in Bigger's cell at the end of the novel were examples of his showing what others thought of Bigger.<sup>76</sup> Yet he maintains, "Throughout there is but one point of view: Bigger's."<sup>77</sup> However, I don't see how Wright can show the symbolic meaning of

68 Wright, *Native Son*, 821.

69 Wright, *Native Son*, 812–13.

70 Wright, *Native Son*, 815.

71 Wright, *Native Son*, 826.

72 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 874.

73 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 878.

74 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 860.

75 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 864.

76 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 878, 880.

77 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 879.

Bigger, his broader political significance, if limited to only Bigger's standpoint. Bigger is inarticulate and grasps his situation only dimly and intuitively. He certainly doesn't understand the broader historical significance of his "type." Moreover, Wright claims that he became aware of Bigger's symbolic significance only after he was familiar with the labor movement and its philosophy.<sup>78</sup> Bigger doesn't join the labor movement (despite Jan's attempt to recruit him) and doesn't understand its program, so he can't express its point of view. In fact, Bigger doesn't even comprehend Max's speech, though "he had felt the meaning of some of it from the tone of Max's voice."<sup>79</sup> There is the omniscient voice of *Native Son's* narrator, who is able to survey Bigger's inner life. But to rely exclusively on the narrator to tell rather than show would not make for compelling art. So it seems that Max is absolutely critical to the fulfillment of Wright's stated literary ambitions.

If Wright's political philosophy can be discerned through a reading of *Native Son*, it can be discovered only through an examination of both Bigger and Max and, crucially, of the interplay between them. Indeed the speech Max gives must be understood in light of his prior prison cell conversation with Bigger.<sup>80</sup> Max puts a battery of questions to Bigger, listens carefully to Bigger's responses, and promises to tell the judge how Bigger feels and why he feels that way.<sup>81</sup> His speech draws heavily from what Bigger says (though it goes far beyond Bigger's remarks). Moreover, Bigger feels strongly that Max was really listening to him and understood his feelings: "He knew that Max was seeking facts to tell the judge; but in Max's asking of those questions he had felt a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered before."<sup>82</sup> As a result of this conversation, Bigger comes to have a "new sense of the value of himself."<sup>83</sup> We might therefore be able to glean Wright's political outlook from Bigger's emerging higher consciousness and Max's social theory. Between the two, we get an account of individual self-affirmation and freedom through justified rebellion (from Bigger) and a theory of modern social development and its sociopsychological consequences (from Max).

### Colonialism and Its Consequences

By the time Wright composed *Black Power* (a travel-writing treatment of Nkrumah's Ghana during the country's revolutionary period), his break from communism would appear to have been complete. He says there that he rejects the

78 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 860.

79 Wright, *Native Son*, 826.

80 Wright, *Native Son*, 767–81.

81 Wright, *Native Son*, 780.

82 Wright, *Native Son*, 782.

83 Wright, *Native Son*, 783.

aims of communism because communism does not respect individual freedom.<sup>84</sup> Communism, at its best, is the realization of Western ideals, particularly its ideals of justice, which the Western world has mostly abandoned and never consistently practiced.<sup>85</sup> But communism too often devolves into nothing more than the will to power. He continues to use Marxist analysis to interpret modern history and Africa's place within it, but he no longer wants to be understood as endorsing Marxist practical philosophy.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, as with his treatment of the Negro in America in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright takes up the condition of colonized peoples of the "Third World" against the background of a theory of history of broadly Marxist provenance.<sup>87</sup>

For Wright, colonialism is, in essence, about maintaining labor discipline, resource extraction, and keeping the native population economically dependent on European powers: "a colony, therefore, became a vast geographical prison whose inmates were presumably sentenced for all time to suffer the exploitation of their human, agricultural, and mineral resources."<sup>88</sup> And as with the subjugation of blacks in America, colonialism in Africa and Asia also brings in its wake far-reaching cultural and psychological consequences.

For instance, in *White Man, Listen!* Wright insists that "white Western Christian civilization" destroyed the traditional cultures of African and Asian peoples, a social transformation to which these peoples are struggling to adjust.<sup>89</sup> European imperial encroachments in Africa and Asia created a "spiritual void" in the lives of the people, a deep and passionate longing for meaning.<sup>90</sup> Imperialism is not only labor exploitation and theft of resources and land; it also robs the natives of the meaning-making beliefs and practices that they have long relied on to make sense of their lives.

Europeans justified their domination over Africans and Asians with racist ideology, thereby fostering irrational racial consciousness among these peoples. Wright claims to know that from a scientific point of view there are no races.<sup>91</sup>

84 Wright, *Black Power*, in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, 9–10.

85 Wright, *Black Power*, 10–11.

86 Wright, *Black Power*, 12.

87 I agree with John Reilly's statement that "in his non-fiction beginning with *Black Power* and continuing through *The Color Curtain* and *White Man, Listen!* Richard Wright undertook an adaptation of conventions that eventually converted journalism into a vehicle for a theory of contemporary reality inspired by a vision of a new people entering history." See John M. Reilly, "Richard Wright and the Art of Non-fiction: Stepping Out on the Stage of the World," in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 416. But I do not accept Reilly's claim that the method Wright relies on in these works is autobiography, as the basic elements of historical materialism continue to be salient.

88 Wright, *Black Power*, 27.

89 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 651–53.

90 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 688–91.

91 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 667.

Biology is not what matters, though. Talk of “the white man” has meaning only “from a historical or sociological point of view.”<sup>92</sup> “Race” is an issue for Asian and African peoples because some Europeans stake their claim to colored peoples’ resources, land, and labor on the superiority of “whiteness.”<sup>93</sup>

In *The Color Curtain* (a quasi-journalistic report on the 1955 African-Asian unity conference in Bandung), Wright provides a brief but fascinating discussion of the consequences of racism.<sup>94</sup> It begins with an anecdote about how an Indonesian official, noticing that Wright was black, gave him preference over a white journalist when issuing press passes. Wright insists that this was “racism” and compares it to the Jim Crow prejudice that he had experienced in the American South. He found it disturbing and “loathsome,” even “evil.” But his point here was not to condemn or excuse it. He was interested in how easy it is to adopt racism or tacitly accept it when one is advantaged by it. And he worried that if nonwhite nations embraced it uncritically, they would become a menacing force in the world.

He also emphasizes that whites had created racism as an instrument of subjugation, and Asians and Africans learned it from their oppressors. He expects Asians and Africans—particularly the uneducated and fearful among them—to practice racism against whites. Europeans initiated racial consciousness, a socio-psychological process several centuries old. It presently constitutes a tradition in its own right. And the fact that many whites now reject or regret it will not make it disappear.<sup>95</sup>

In a Freudian twist to the usual Marxist-Leninist story of modern imperialism, Wright claims that Europeans, freed of the restraining force of tradition, were in search of a place where they could feed their repressed libidinal desires. They found this in Africa and Asia: “Living in a waking dream, generations of emotionally impoverished colonial European whites wallowed in the quick gratification of greed, reveled in the cheap superiority of racial domination, slaked their sensual thirst in illicit sexuality, draining off the damned-up libido that European morality had condemned, amassing through trade a vast reservoir of economic fat, thereby establishing vast accumulations of capital which spurred the industrialization of the West.”<sup>96</sup> And yet when modern Western man looks at Africa, he also sees himself—and he hates what he sees.<sup>97</sup> This self-loathing, this sense of inferiority, a projection of his soul onto Africa, makes him want to destroy the continent as personal vindication.

However, Wright’s most insightful (if speculative) and extended commentary

92 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 667.

93 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 667.

94 Wright, *The Color Curtain*, in *Black Power*, 519–21.

95 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 521.

96 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 654–55.

97 Wright, *Black Power*, 197.

on the condition of Africans and Asians concerns how the combination of racism and colonialism affected the psychology of the oppressed. He claims that non-white peoples are often ashamed of physical features that make them look different from whites—especially their skin color and hair texture—and they are ashamed of the fact that they are ashamed.<sup>98</sup> Colored nations also measure their social progress in terms of how close they are to Western nations, or how far away, which also makes them feel inferior, as does the inability to fully identify with either Western culture or their native traditions.<sup>99</sup> Colored peoples see and feel Europeans and their descendants, no matter the differences between them, as part of an indivisible white collective agent.<sup>100</sup> They conceptualize time in terms of *before* and *after* the White Man came.<sup>101</sup> They hate talk of natives “evolving” toward civilization, for it suggests that they may never quite measure up, and they hate how some whites romanticize “primitive” life among colored peoples.<sup>102</sup> There is a general suspicion that Europeans don’t want Asians and Africans to “catch up” with them, a sense that whites are secretly attempting to block parity in a “racial” race to the top.<sup>103</sup>

These effects of racial consciousness, Wright believed, were tragic, a distortion of human personality. He did not, however, blame people of color for being slow to overcome them. And he didn’t think whites had the standing to blame colored people for not having recovered from them. The time when truly human relations beyond race are widespread would likely take awhile to reach us, if it ever does.<sup>104</sup>

Wright did feel a sense of solidarity with African and Asian peoples. But in identifying with the darker peoples of the globe, he sought to avoid reifying “race.” For example, in Wright’s speech (which Kwame Nkrumah invited him to give) at the Convention People’s Party rally in what was then the Gold Coast, he said: “I’m one of the lost sons of Africa who has come back to look upon the land of his forefathers. In a superficial sense it may be said that I’m a stranger to most of you, but, in terms of common heritage of suffering and hunger for freedom, your heart and my heart beat as one.”<sup>105</sup> Wright doesn’t fall back on racial identity here but rather notes the common experience of European domination and exploitation connecting blacks of the Diaspora with blacks on the continent. Moreover, he does not appear to embrace Pan-Africanism, at least not as a set of basic principles. After his visit to Ghana, Wright wrote to Nkrumah, “I felt an odd kind of at-homeness, a solidarity that stemmed not from ties of blood or race, or from my being of African descent, but from the quality of deep hope and suffering embed-

98 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 578–81.

99 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 584.

100 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 658–60.

101 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 660–61.

102 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 663–64.

103 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 665–66.

104 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 586.

105 Wright, *Black Power*, 102.

ded in the lives of your people, from the hard facts of oppression that cut across time, space, and culture.”<sup>106</sup>

Despite Wright’s distaste for both religious belief and racial consciousness, he believed, surprisingly, that the full and permanent emancipation of colonized peoples would and should rely on these ideas and sentiments. He argues that African and Asian elites, educated in the West, who come to lead the national liberation movements in their native homelands inevitably fuse indigenous religion with nationalism to mobilize, organize, and direct the masses to their freedom.<sup>107</sup> Race and religion are exploited in demagogic fashion because the ideas of individual liberty and self-redemption associated with the West do not yet have appeal to the African and Asian masses. Though romantic racial nationalism must ultimately be transcended, nationalism in Africa and Asia can help to bring about industrialization.<sup>108</sup>

Wright argues that Africans cannot pass from the traditional to the modern until the “African personality” embodies a new *Weltanschauung*. A psychological shift must occur that is even more important than economic modernization. This change will not come about through direct Western influence (or if it does, it will come at the cost of economic independence) but must be accomplished by Africans themselves under stern leadership and rapidly.<sup>109</sup> This means, at a minimum, breaking down the hierarchical tribal kinship system and eliminating religious “mumbo-jumbo.”<sup>110</sup> Wright seems to have thought that gradual modernization under democratic governance would take so long that other reactionary elements would have a chance to undercut progressive movement and draw out the inevitable suffering. Or the communists would take hold, bringing Africa under a different type of European rule. Instead he notoriously advocated *forced and rapid industrialization under strict social discipline*, what he calls a “militarization of African life.”<sup>111</sup>

Wright maintained that Asian and African elites recognized that to stave off recolonization or to avoid incorporation into the Soviet Union, they would ultimately have to break the grip that tradition and religion held over their people. But they were reluctant to use the necessary methods (which would likely include something akin to dictatorship), for they thought this would be tantamount to fascism.<sup>112</sup> But Wright believed they must overcome this hesitancy, for political realism demanded it.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 410.

<sup>107</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 280–88; *Color Curtain*, 541–42.

<sup>108</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 77.

<sup>109</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 410–11.

<sup>110</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 415.

<sup>111</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 417.

<sup>112</sup> Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 684.

<sup>113</sup> Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 684–87.

He emphasized that not every oppressed person of color has a “mangled” personality.<sup>114</sup> Some, “a minority of minorities,” manage to cultivate a cosmopolitan, postconventional, and scientific outlook. They don’t divide the world into races, classes, religions, or nations. They see the commonality in all humankind and regard the earth as belonging to us all, with no social group having its assigned continent, regardless of the group’s ancestral origins. This attitude is found mostly among Asian and African artists and intellectuals, many of whom have been educated in the West. It also exists among the Asian and African elite leadership (e.g., Nkrumah, Nasser, and Nehru). The West must therefore not attempt to overthrow or delegitimize these leaders, for they are the only hope for a peaceful, just, and cosmopolitan future.

Indeed Wright would demand much more from the West. The communiqué document from the Bandung conference was implicitly addressed to the West. It was a kind of jeremiad, “A LAST CALL OF WESTERNIZED ASIANS TO THE MORAL CONSCIENCE OF THE WEST!”<sup>115</sup> Wright expressed the hope that this call would be heeded, that it would usher in a “de-Occidentalization” of humanity. On this vision—which is fundamentally economic rather than “racial”—the earth’s resources and technical know-how are to be fairly shared across nations and colored nations are not to be made dependent on the West for their material health. But, he hastens to add, this would naturally mean that the average white Westerner would have to adjust to a lower standard of living, for Westerners would no longer be able to live on the forced sacrifices of the rest of the world.

However, Wright did not believe that such a program of global economic justice would be sufficient to solve the cultural problems of Asia and Africa.<sup>116</sup> Widespread ignorance, irrationality, and superstition, particularly dangerous religious and racial passions, would remain, retarding social progress and posing a threat to the West. He therefore contended that these remnants of premodern and colonial life must be swept away and that this urgently needed reform would inevitably involve Western assistance in industrializing those that Western nations formerly exploited.<sup>117</sup>

Wright was convinced that parts of the Western world were grounded in a secular and scientific outlook. It is this rational perspective on life that makes it permissible, according to Wright, for the West to play a role in the development of Africa and Asia. Because the African and Asian elites have been educated in the West, they too share this rational outlook. Wright imagines an alliance between the progressive forces in the Western world and the African and Asian elite that would speedily drive out racial and religious attitudes and customs. He suggested that if

<sup>114</sup> Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 678–81.

<sup>115</sup> Wright, *Color Curtain*, in 593.

<sup>116</sup> Wright, *Color Curtain*, 596–97.

<sup>117</sup> Wright, *Color Curtain*, 600–606.



the democratic nations of the West will not play this role, the communist nations will do so, with all the terrible losses of freedom that this entailed in Russia.<sup>118</sup>

Europe must acknowledge its role in creating these problems and accept its responsibility to provide redress.<sup>119</sup> The African and Asian elite must not be left to go it alone. In a striking and memorable passage, Wright emphasizes that the world has inherited from Europe many good things but also many evil things: "Europe must be big enough to accept its Descartes and its Cortés and what they did. Europe must be big enough to accept its Hume of England and its Leopold II of Belgium and what they did. It must possess enough stern responsibility to accept both its Goethe and its Hitler."<sup>120</sup> While acknowledging that the white West should offer Africa industrial techniques, machinery, gifts, and loans, Wright thought that one of the most important things the Western powers could do for Africa was accept responsibility for all the wrong they did and the havoc they caused. This public and sincere acknowledgment would provide assurance that they wouldn't attempt to colonize Africa again, removing much anxiety among African peoples. The African elite could then modernize their societies without worrying about threats from the white West.<sup>121</sup>

Wright never wavered in his opinion that European imperialism was exploitative, brutal, and wrong.<sup>122</sup> But he thought an unintended beneficial consequence of colonialism was that it put in motion the destruction of the irrational religious and traditional practices of Africa and Asia.<sup>123</sup> This process would ultimately be liberating. But the Europeans left a void that they did not and could not fill. This emptiness was to be remedied by Western-educated Asian and African elites, who were in many ways more Western than Western whites. They were the bridge between East and West; they were the agents who must act to create one rational world. And the white West must aid them in their efforts by giving them *carte blanche* to use whatever methods, including "quasi-dictatorial" ones, were necessary to modernize their nations.<sup>124</sup>

### Realizing Western Ideals

Wright regarded himself as "much more the diagnostician than the scribbler of prescriptions"; as he says, "I'm no Moses."<sup>125</sup> This is a fair self-assessment. Yet

118 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 607–9.

119 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 697.

120 Wright, *Color Curtain*, 697.

121 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 810.

122 For a detailed and charitable discussion of Wright's anticolonial stance in relation to Africa, see Kevin Kelly Gaines, "Revisiting Richard Wright in Ghana: Black Radicalism and the Dialectics of Diaspora," *Social Text* 67 (2001): 75–101.

123 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 718–22.

124 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 725.

125 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 646.

basic ideals do structure his political thought, ideals that Wright associated with Western modernity. Modernization in the West is not just a set of social processes that mark the break from European feudalism to liberal capitalism (or to authoritarian communism). It is a moral framework and an institutional arrangement, a schema of fundamental values and a mode of social organization.

Among these values is a secular worldview that denies the existence of magic and maintains a strict separation of church and state. In *Pagan Spain*, Wright argues that Spain is not really a part of “the West” despite the fact that it is in Europe and despite outward appearances to the contrary.<sup>126</sup> In fact, in his estimation Spain wasn’t even a Christian nation but remained mired in its pagan past. The fundamental trouble with Spain, according to Wright, was that it had not gone through a process of secularization. It had retained its deeply irrational religious consciousness, which thoroughly structured Spanish social life. Rather than a human invention to secure liberty and to advance the common good, even the *state* was viewed as sacred. This, for Wright, was a sign of backwardness. Moreover, he condemned the lack of religious freedom and the failure to separate church and state, and he even compared the condition of Protestants under the Catholic Church to the oppression of black people under Jim Crow.

Closely connected to secularization is a scientific worldview.<sup>127</sup> There are no occult forces that escape the causal nexus or the laws of nature. Science is the highest expression of human rationality and intelligence, and it should be the epistemic basis on which we formulate our beliefs about our environment and ourselves. A scientific worldview fosters a spirit of pragmatism, a healthy fallibilism, and a willingness to rely on the method of trial and error (rather than dogma or wishful thinking) to make progress. Science also gives us both the know-how to maintain and improve human health (including mental health) and the technology to control our environment, making it serviceable to our needs.

Wright vehemently opposed capitalism, finding it exploitative and wasteful, and he thought it appealed to our basest instincts—greed, selfishness, and materialism. But he strongly favored industrialization. Machine-based production not only saves time and labor (a practical application of science that creates more efficient means for meeting human needs) but shapes human personality in a progressive direction, breaking down reactionary forces of tradition that cause degrading forms of stasis. Industrialization includes the training needed to use complex technology and the cultivation of habits that allow individuals to meet the dynamic demands of urban life.

A rational society, according to Wright, includes centralized government: “A central government is an absolute necessity if man is to live at all rationally. How can you trade with nations of the world, how can you educate your children, how

<sup>126</sup> Wright, *Pagan Spain* (orig. 1957; Jackson, MS: Banner Books, 1995), 228–29.

<sup>127</sup> Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 708–9.

can you wipe out disease, how can you defend yourself against aggression unless you have a strong central government?"<sup>128</sup> A crucial function of government is to ensure mass education and spread literacy, which are bulwarks against demagoguery and communism.<sup>129</sup> Without an educated public, democratic governance is unworkable and fascism is an ever-present threat.

Wright was committed to the liberal values of freedom, tolerance, and individualism: "I hold human freedom as a supreme right and good for all men, my conception of freedom being the right of all men to exercise their natural and acquired powers as long as the exercise of those powers does not hinder others from doing the same."<sup>130</sup> There should be freedom of thought and expression without restriction from state or church. Wright maintained that human life has inherent dignity and value apart from any religious mandate.<sup>131</sup> Respect and concern for the individual, he insisted, should be the highest value, compromised only under extreme circumstances.<sup>132</sup> Even his opposition to racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation was based as much on the ways they wrongly restrict individual freedom as on their irrationality and insult.<sup>133</sup>

It is not sufficient for the ideals of Western modernity to be realized in laws, social institutions, and public rules. They must also be embodied in human personality and individual outlook. Wright believed himself to be a modern Western man in search of a rational and free society to call home. His self-understanding as a civilized Western person therefore gives us another window into his normative perspective.

Wright had a self-conception as a freedom-loving, rational, and cosmopolitan individual: "I have no religion in the formal sense of the word. . . . I have no race except that which is forced upon me. I have no country except that to which I'm obliged to belong. I have no traditions. I'm free. I have only the future."<sup>134</sup>

The conception of freedom that Wright endorsed was not restricted to liberal values (for example, the limits on a state's authority to interfere with individual choice). Existentialist values also played a role.<sup>135</sup> In particular, Wright did not accept that there was some predetermined form of life that each must affirm and show fidelity to if one is to live authentically. Individuals who are regarded and

128 Wright, *Black Power*, 274.

129 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 701–2.

130 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 709.

131 Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 708–9.

132 Wright, "I Choose Exile" (unpublished manuscript, 1951).

133 Wright, "I Choose Exile."

134 Wright, *Pagan Spain*, 21.

135 For a discussion of Wright's relation to existentialist thought, see my "Freedom in a Godless and Unhappy World: Wright as Outsider," in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright*, ed. Glenda R. Carpio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 121–38. Also see Michel Fabre, "Richard Wright and the French Existentialists," *MELUS* 5 (1978): 39–51; and Nina Kressner Cobb, "Richard Wright: Exile and Existentialism," *Phylon* 40 (1979): 362–74.

treated as “Negroes” needn’t let their “blackness” fix who they understand themselves to be or limit who they will become. Wright valued our freedom to engage in self-fashioning, to strive to realize ideals of life we have autonomously chosen. To submit to tradition, either spontaneously or because one feels one cannot do otherwise, is to live in bad faith.<sup>136</sup>

Part of Wright’s self-understanding as a rational person is constituted by his commitment to a scientific worldview, one that includes the social sciences and psychology. As he says, “It was not until I stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me.”<sup>137</sup> And in his written work he sought to fuse the insights of scientific study and artistic imagination. The other dimension of Wright’s view of himself as “rational” is his militant rejection of religion and superstition, a theme he pursues, in various ways, in all his published books, fiction and nonfiction. He describes himself as “areligious”—that is, without religious belief.<sup>138</sup>

But Wright’s opposition to religion is about more than being a rational person. It is also a manifestation of his love of freedom: “I refuse to make a religion out of that which I do not know. I too can feel the limit of my reactions, can feel where my puny self ends, can savor the terror of it; but it does not make me want to impose that sense of my terror on others, or rear it into a compulsive system.”<sup>139</sup> Like communism and fascism, religion is an expression of an unacknowledged desire to dominate: “Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn.”<sup>140</sup> Indeed Wright’s love of freedom was so profound that he insisted that “unless I feel free to let my instincts range, free to come and go as I please, free to probe and examine my environment, I languish, I wither, I die.”<sup>141</sup>

Finally, Wright considered himself a citizen of the world, at home on any part of the globe and capable of connecting with people of diverse national backgrounds. He describes himself as “rootless,” as not in need of many emotional attachments and allegiances.<sup>142</sup> Being alone in the world, he believed, is natural, and he was at peace with it. It is an inescapable if unsettling feature of the human condition that he embraced.

<sup>136</sup> This existentialist ideal of freedom also extended, for Wright, to the political realm, where one selects allies and enemies. See Lori J. Marso, “Solidarity sans Identity: Richard Wright and Simone de Beauvoir Theorize Political Subjectivity,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 13 (2014): 242–62.

<sup>137</sup> Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xvii.

<sup>138</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 168.

<sup>139</sup> Wright, *Black Power*, 38.

<sup>140</sup> Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 130.

<sup>141</sup> Wright, “I Choose Exile.”

<sup>142</sup> Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, 647.

## Conclusion

As a political thinker, Wright was wide ranging, intrepid, and astute. Despite his fame as a writer, he remains an underappreciated political philosopher and social theorist. The vision he articulated, while rich and creative, is not of course wholly original. Despite his repudiation of communist dogma, the influence of Marx (particularly historical materialism and the theory of ideology) on his outlook was quite strong. His theory of modernity and its psychological consequences draws heavily from Weber (perhaps filtered through the Chicago school of sociology) and Freud. His view of religion, fascism, and communism as rooted in the all-too-human (though generally unacknowledged) desire to dominate others owes much to Nietzsche. Moreover, Wright seems to have consciously refused to place his ideas within the history of black radical thought, almost never giving credit to those who came before him. The absence of explicit engagement with Du Bois (an elder but contemporary) is particularly odd, given how much Du Bois's post-*Souls* writings (for example, *Darkwater*, *Dark Princess*, *Dusk of Dawn*, and *The World and Africa*) overlap with Wright's postexile themes. This unfortunate tendency on Wright's part could give some readers the impression (perhaps intended) that he was the first or only prominent left-wing black American writer to offer a global perspective on problems of race, economic exploitation, and imperialism.

Wright's political theory is also not without its flaws. His unflattering, and arguably ethnocentric, portraits of the peoples and cultures of Ghana and Spain are not firmly grounded in empirical research but in the casual observations of an outsider who lacked the native tongue. Wright, as has been often noted, sometimes depicts women, particularly black women, in an unsympathetic and arguably sexist way.<sup>143</sup> (However, there are some subtle treatments of black women in *Uncle Tom's Children* and *The Long Dream*.) His deep hostility and intolerance toward all forms of religion was not only unjustified but also illiberal (and contrary to his own professed commitments). Wright's extreme cosmopolitan rootlessness and quest to live beyond all tradition are hardly inspiring ideals, not even for artists and intellectuals.<sup>144</sup> His view of race consciousness and black solidarity as racist and suitable only for demagoguery cannot withstand scrutiny.<sup>145</sup> Wright was certainly mistaken in thinking that having a scientific worldview justifies interfering with the affairs of "less rational" peoples. Generally, "I know better than you" is insufficient reason (unless you are my child) for me to override your freedom to

<sup>143</sup> For a polemical but thought-provoking discussion of Wright on gender, see Williams, "Papa Dick and Sister-Woman."

<sup>144</sup> For a more defensible take on what it means to be cosmopolitan, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>145</sup> I have defended a nonracialist form of black solidarity in Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005).

conduct your affairs as you see fit. And I don't see any way to square Wright's firm rejection of communist and fascist authoritarianism with his (perhaps reluctant) embrace of the "militarization" of Africa under Western-educated black elites.<sup>146</sup>

Yet I believe there is much that we can learn from Wright. Though he no doubt exaggerated the threat, he was correct to emphasize that race thinking and religious dogma often function, sometimes together, as dangerous ideologies that legitimize injustice. The oppressed, including global black populations, should be wary of building their identities and ties of affiliation on such sources. Wright shows the limits of romantic black nationalist aspirations, and he throws cold water on Négritude and Afrocentric ideas about the essential cultural unity of all who have been racialized as black. His message is a wake-up call to those who seek to resist white supremacy by rejecting all ideas and practices associated with Western modernity. Liberalism, for example, has its virtues and needn't be allied with capitalism. Science, and the technical and biomedical know-how it makes possible, has been and can continue to be a force for good. Our task is to prevent it from being used mainly for private gain and exploitation. Wright was surely correct that European former colonial powers must accept responsibility for the consequences of imperialism and atone for their wrongdoing. Whether this should take the form of helping to industrialize postcolonial nations is, I take it, a matter of ongoing debate.

Wright wisely rejected the race-versus-class schema that still structures so much debate on the American Left. Nor did he engage in the futile attempt to "reduce" race to class—that is, to try to understand all matters of race in terms of interclass dynamics. He recognized that racial domination and its accompanying ideology of white supremacy would have long-term global effects, including cultural and psychological ones. This insight allowed him to steer a path between Marxism and black nationalism, the most promising route, in my view, for progressive black politics.

Wright believed in the agency of the oppressed but did not romanticize them. He understood and was unwilling to deny that oppressed people can respond badly, sometimes tragically, to their conditions. He saw that violence could be more than an expression of fear, resentment, or catharsis. It could be a perverse source of meaning for the oppressed (among others), particularly in an age where anomie was common. Wright was also onto something, I believe, when he explored the lure and loathing of "whiteness" among darker peoples. Staving off racial self-hate and a sense of inferiority is a challenge that many fail to meet. In many ways, people of color can be as obsessed with whiteness as so-called white people are. Wright therefore teaches the necessity of overcoming fear and servil-

<sup>146</sup> For a detailed and insightful treatment of the weaknesses in Wright's approach to decolonization and modernization in Africa, see Yogita Goyal, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 4.

ity to become fit for effective resistance. There must be an *ethics of the oppressed*, a set of values that guide the unjustly disadvantaged away from self-damaging and undignified conduct and toward self-respect if not liberation.

The “resentful millions” do have, as Malcolm X would later emphasize, revolutionary potential. But Wright correctly noted that they can just as easily become a reactionary force, by turning on each other, striking out against authority in fruitless and self-destructive ways, or submitting without recognizing that they’re doing so. This is why, anticipating Martin Luther King Jr. here, it is crucial for the leaders of the oppressed to defend and teach the ethics of resistance. It is unfortunate that Wright didn’t advocate this same approach for decolonization, settling instead for dictatorial and demagogic tactics. But leaders like Gandhi and Mandela proved him wrong.

Finally, Wright shows how a black person coming from impoverished circumstances and limited formal education can nevertheless find meaning in a life of the mind and make a difference in this world with his pen alone. Wright was able to do this without the unmatched oratorical gifts of Douglass or the extraordinary educational background and scholarly distinction of Du Bois. As a true proletarian writer, he won international recognition and lasting influence, and his trajectory not only is remarkable but remains inspiring.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>147</sup> For helpful feedback on previous drafts of this essay, I thank Glenda Carpio, Robert Gooding-Williams, Yogita Goyal, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Lori Marso, Melvin Rogers, Werner Sollors, Josef Sorett, and Jack Turner. Versions of the paper were presented at Columbia University, UCLA, and Yale University, and I thank these audiences for their questions and comments.

## 19: Bayard Rustin

### Between Democratic Theory and Black Political Thought

George Shulman

#### Introduction

In my view Rustin was neither a profound political theorist nor a great literary stylist, but he is crucial to include in a volume on black political thought. Why? First, his activist life and his views of race and politics—articulated politically and polemically in speeches and essays during the 1960s take us into the constitutive tensions both within and between the canons of black political thought and modern democratic theory. If read as exemplary, his life and work enable fruitful self-reflection on our current debates about race, democratic politics, and (black) political thought. Second, Rustin's arguments in the 1960s set the stage for, and help explain, the racial impasse of our “post-civil rights” moment as legal enfranchisement but intensifying inequality and pervasive violence provoke parallel debates about the appropriate political response. In both regards, his political and theoretical trajectory is a vehicle for reflecting on the tensions animating our canons and paralyzing our politics.<sup>1</sup>

These reflections are organized around Bayard Rustin's famous polemic “From Protest to Politics,” written in February 1965, not long after Lyndon Johnson's November 1964 landslide electoral victory. After twenty years of the radical political practice that he called “direct mass action,” he criticized what he called “protest” and distinguished it from “politics,” defined as strategic collective action to forge coalitions, remake political parties, use the state, and transform political economy to secure a dignified livelihood for all. Rather than depict kinds of action or dimensions of politics, he depicted a sequence that authorized harsh judgments of “protest” in the name of the instrumental effectiveness he equated with “politics.” In these terms, he would move the civil rights movement beyond a legalism focused on formal equality, but he also claimed that protest and politics were being confused by activists under the signs of Black Power, the New Left, and an emerging antiwar movement.

To emphasize racial disparity rather than class commonality, to presume white

<sup>1</sup> Sources for Rustin quotations in the text are John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), abbreviated in the text as *LP*, and *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, ed. Devon Carbado and Donald Wiese (San Francisco: Cleiss, 2003) abbreviated as *TTC*. I am indebted to the readings of Mark Reinhardt, David Robinson, and Jishnu Guha-Majumdar.



intransigence, to withdraw from coalition, and to focus internally on ethnonationalism, he argued to Black Power advocates, would generate white backlash and foreclose the coalitional class politics necessary to progressive possibility. To focus on antiwar protest, defend the Viet Cong, and reject electoral politics, he argued to the New Left, would fracture the interracial working-class majority that otherwise could be mobilized by the Democratic Party to transform the political economy. His unequivocally critical judgments of Black Power and New Left advocacy were thus twinned with an emphatically hopeful judgment about the possibility of remaking the Democratic Party to achieve a progressive hegemony.

In public debate and published responses, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Staughton Lynd defended their political practice, partly by denying the credibility of Rustin's vision of political possibility and partly by defending the immediate value and long-term efficacy of the localized participation that Rustin reduced to "protest" and that some now call radical democracy or horizontalism. In turn, how we now assess their contrasting judgments of their fraught moment is inescapably entangled with our (surely fallible) judgments, both of their moment and of our own. How shall we interpret the pertinence and untimeliness of this three-sided debate in our own debates about Obama, empire, and race, about the Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements and the Democratic Party?

One abiding fault line appears between participatory (local, decentralized, or horizontal) as compared to progressive (larger-scale, statecentric) visions of democracy and social change. This contrast divided the civil rights movement between "community control" as a local participatory practice advocated by activists invoking Black Power, and the coalition politics and legislative focus of social democratic critics like Rustin. Of course this contrast bespeaks—but it should not be reduced to—historic tensions between "nationalist" and "integrationist" registers in the canon of black political theory. As the Left also divided between a "progressive" labor movement invested in state programs and a New Left invested in "participatory democracy," soon linked to forms of identity politics, so this tension—between democracy as sovereignty or rule linked to the state, and democracy as localist anarchy linked to community—echoes in the canon of radical/democratic theory.<sup>2</sup>

A second abiding division appears, however, between Rustin's Black Power and New Left adversaries and within Rustin's own practice. For notable differences in orientation, style, and practice follow when political thinking begins with the ideal of radical democracy or with the fact of white supremacy and the way it wedds popular sovereignty to a racial state. If some in the canon of black political thought—Douglass and Du Bois—shift between "progressive" visions of systemic change and "immanent" participatory practices locally tended, it may be because

2 My goal is not to reify but to complicate these distinctions and undermine their polarization, by showing their relationship within any thinker or text and by showing their necessary complementarity in worldly politics.

they apprehend theoretically, and must seek to inhabit politically, this abyssal interval between civic life and social death. To begin in the racial state of exception is to pressure both progressive and participatory visions of democratic politics. If we begin with racial (in)justice, we see how “bottom-up” and “top-down” visions of social change cannot be severed but must be thought in tandem and tension.<sup>3</sup>

In his life, Rustin articulated both a radically participatory and non- (often anti-) statist practice and a “progressive” version of democratic socialism. That project, usually placed in the tradition of Eugene Debs, A. Philip Randolph, and Michael Harrington, is better seen as a Gramscian vision of a national-popular movement seeking hegemony by remaking the Democratic Party, the state, and political economy. By 1965, though, Rustin had separated decentralized participatory dimensions of politics from his own history, and located them only in Black Power and the New Left, whose practice he dismissed as merely expressive, marginalizing, and divisive, compared to the broadly unifying and regime-changing prospects he now attributed to a party politics addressing structural reform around issues of social equality and livelihood. He simplified, even caricatured, the positions he criticized, and his targets responded in kind, accusing him of fantastical thinking and self-defeating tactics. In fundamental or deep ways they disagreed about how to depict “objective conditions” and define what is necessary, ideal, (im)possible, and (un)realistic.

Such constitutive judgments bespeak what I call “organizing fantasies,” mythopoetic visions of the real that figure forth a social landscape and emplot a history, conjure a collective actor, and render its action plausible. If we see Rustin defending not bureaucratic New Deal liberalism or even top-down social democracy but a Gramscian radicalism—more a predecessor of Bernie Sanders than of Hillary Clinton—and if we credit more than he did the contrasting “organizing fantasies” of his Black Power and New Left adversaries, then we do not rehearse a debate between positions we already deem either self-evidently correct or mistaken, but instead we witness a tragic agon among three protagonists investing intense pathos in colliding positions. Once we grant that actors and theorists typically defend an organizing fantasy (at least partly) by blaming failure on the wayward or recalcitrant subjects who spoil it, the visions in this three-way agon appear credible, undone by history, yet resonant still.

Indeed their clash echoes in debates—and impasses—that mark the fraught,

3 In a critical commentary on an earlier version of this essay, Jishnu Guha-Majumdar suggested adding two more dimensions to my account of argumentative traditions around race and around radical democracy. To the “progressive” and “horizontal” distinction he suggested adding a temporal dimension contrasting those who depict a providential arc in history and those who see the a-theist ongoingness of contingency and catastrophe. Along this dimension, Rustin and Malcolm X differ on horizontalism but agree on providential direction in history. Another dimension concerns whether thinkers emphasize unity (by race, class, common good) or intersectionality: Rustin and Malcolm X disagree about race and class, but each minimizes intersectionality, compared to Ella Baker.

still-undigested legacy of the “second reconstruction” that ended by 1968, with Nixon’s election. For as critics now question the instrumental value or strategic purpose of the direct action model of both Occupy and post-Ferguson organizing, reducing these to the merely expressive and symbolic, the tension between Rustin’s own history of radical practice and his later “strategic” critique of those he reduced to “protest,” seems uncannily repeated. At the same time, as Occupy activism failed to reach people of color, and as Black Lives Matter activism fails to gain white acknowledgment of racial exception, the fatal gap between organizing fantasies emphasizing white supremacy and organizing fantasies emphasizing the radically democratic also seems repeated rather than reworked. One can readily feel trapped in a loop: how do historical amnesia, unchanged structural impasse, and duality in the political compel repetition of polarized positions?

In my view, Rustin warrants our attention because his life and polemics expose such tensions both within and between the canons of black political thought and democratic theory. Over forty years of organizing, he engaged in every dimension and kind of politics—mass action and public protest, electoral mobilization, hidden negotiation, legislative lobbying—while at each moment unequivocally voicing contrasting but credible perspectives on what politics is and what a democratic strategy requires. Arguing that we should trust the tale rather than the teller, I will thus read his life as a site of tensions we polarize in sterile repetition or sustain as a generative ground.<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, my wager is that his arguments and choices, in themselves and as they change in significant and contradictory ways, can help us see—to think through—*abiding* debates that seem constitutive or fundamental, and recurring if not repetitive, in the traditions of both black political thought and of radical democracy. Moreover, Rustin’s polemics serve as a fruitful way to ask how these two canons could intersect, to think race and radical democracy together. I thus situate him in two “argumentative traditions,” to use Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept for deep contest between interlocutors who remain intelligible to each other, while I also emphasize the gap (and incomprehension) created because one tradition begins with white supremacy while the other begins with the political. In the course of a long political life, Rustin demonstrated the possibility and difficulty of making this gap an interval to inhabit.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> My reading of Rustin does not emphasize the meaning of his sexuality for his politics. D’Emilio’s biography powerfully depicts the *historical* role of Rustin’s sexuality in his repeated marginalization from the civil rights movement, and it suggests that his sexuality drove his political orientation in three significant regards. One concerns his Quaker faith in the equality of each and every person in terms of dignity and agency, a faith that was expressed in the revolutionary humanism animating his commitment to both nonviolence and direct action. The second concerns Black Power, for as we will see, D’Emilio attributes his hostility partly to the aggressive heterosexuality of advocates performing a certain masculinity and partly to an ethnic particularism that violated Rustin’s core humanism. Third, D’Emilio believes that his experience of constant marginalization turned him against those on the Left who idealized marginality.

<sup>5</sup> For argumentative tradition, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

On the other hand, though, rereading Rustin means crediting the profound changes—thus the distance—separating his historical conjuncture and ours, a distance that appears in each argumentative tradition as interlocutors reimagine the “problem-space” they inhabit and shift the questions they ask and answer. Rustin—and his Black Power and New Left interlocutors—occupied a problem-space of questions and answers that no longer seems credible, because they assumed a background of New Deal liberalism and global (anticolonial) black insurgency, and we cannot. In our “post-civil rights” era we inhabit what David Scott calls the “ruins” of those projects. To what extent, therefore, must we ask and answer different questions from those of Rustin and his adversaries? Still, how are their questions and answers pertinent to our own? Let us then use Rustin and his adversaries to engage how we narrate the genesis of our moment, conceive its meaning, and make it a condition of possibility.<sup>6</sup>

### Recovering Rustin’s Radicalism

It is crucial to recognize the pre-1964 radicalism that made Rustin a hero to the young Stokely Carmichael, and that included the direct action that Staughton Lynd later accused Rustin of betraying.<sup>7</sup>

First, he emerged from a Quaker pacifism that AJ Muste encouraged him to inflect in a revolutionary way. They conceived nonviolence not as personal moral witness but in revolutionary terms of direct action and systemic transformation: “Our only valid objective is the transformation of society, not the building of a shelter for the saints. . . . In a world built on violence, one must be a revolutionary before one can be a pacifist.” In contrast to his later fear of political margin-

6 This essay is indebted to two ideas beautifully developed by David Scott in *Conscripts of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and subsequent writings. First is the “problem-space” metaphor he drew from R. G. Collingwood: “A body of knowledge consists not merely of propositions or statements that give it positive standing but of these together with the often unarticulated questions they are meant to answer.” Scott, “The Temporality of Generations: Dialogue, Tradition, Criticism,” *New Literary History*, no. 45 (2014): 173. Thus has Scott theorized the difference between the anticolonial imaginary of a founding revolutionary generation and the “postcolonial” impasse faced by their heirs: “The task is not to write from the *outside* as it were, an intellectual history of these generations, but to reconstruct from the *inside* the intellectual problem-spaces out of which these older generations had conceived and promoted the anti-colonial project I would come to inherit, more or less, as a *ruin*” (Scott, “Temporality,” 158). The second idea is intergenerational miscomprehension: looking back, should we presume predecessors are mistaken by the light of our own structure of understanding, or should we credit how they lived in a different problem-space?

7 D’Emilio says: “He presided over the transformation of direct action tactics from the cherished possession of a few initiates to its embrace by millions of Americans. He resurrected mass political protest from the graveyard in which cold war anti-communism had buried it and made it a vibrant expression of citizen rights in a free society.” More than anyone else, he “insinuated non-violence into the heart of the black freedom struggle” (*LP*, 1). It is these projects that led Stokely Carmichael to say: “When I saw him I said that’s it, a black man who’s a socialist, that’s the real answer. At that moment he appeared to be the revolution, the most revolutionary man” (*LP*, 276).

ality, he warns those seeking “immediate” and “far-reaching” “change for the better” to “prepare to be looked upon as queer . . . [and like Socrates, Luther . . . and Thoreau] as foolish, unrealistic, idealistic, premature, and doing more harm than good” (*LP*, 42, 129).

Second, Rustin’s pacifism was internationalist and anti-imperial. He embraced A. Philip Randolph’s wartime effort to set race and nation in the context of global imperialism: “Only a peace without imperialism will be a just peace.” In 1944 Rustin did not register for the draft, refusing the state’s option of conscientious objection, and during twenty-seven fraught months in prison he organized protests against the racial segregation mandated by prison authorities. Experience in India in 1947 confirmed his view that nonviolence as an “end and means” had to repudiate nationalism. He thus faulted the Gandhian movement: “It is non-violent in its means” only by “expediency because they had no guns,” and “essentially violent in its end, which was nationalism” (*LP*, 167). When Truman renewed conscription, Rustin prefigured the Black Panther Party position on Vietnam: “Negroes do not propose to shoulder another gun for democracy while they are denied democracy here at home” (*TTC*, 29).

Third, through Muste and Randolph he imagined a socialism that was “revolutionary,” but also democratic, because it was nonviolent. Just as Marx had argued that workers in the US would oppose capitalism politically only after slavery was defeated, Rustin organized “protest” to topple Jim Crow in the name of formal equality, with the intention of following Marx’s trajectory from formal to substantive equality, from discrimination to class struggle. That national-popular movement would overcome structural inequality by crossing race lines.

This view was articulated in the “prospectus” he coauthored for the journal *Liberation*, which premiered in April 1956 (and later published Lynd’s critique of Rustin’s “protest” polemic). Critical of classical liberalism, orthodox Marxism, and Stalinist communism, it sought “a creative synthesis of the individual ethical insight of the great religious leaders and the collective social concern of the great revolutionists.” The journal rejected a centralized bureaucratized state as the problematic legacy of capitalism; prefiguring the New Left, it called for a “re-definition and restructuring of power” by making “nonviolence, democratic participation, and decentralized institutions” political means and not only ends.<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, Rustin was involved with Ella Baker in founding the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) as a political alternative to the legalistic focus of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). They organized churches to “rouse whole communities to action,” so “ordinary

<sup>8</sup> *Liberation* “acted as a transmission belt of perspectives and experience across three generations.” Dorothy Day and A. J. Muste were born at the turn of the century; a second generation included Michael Harrington, Paul Goodman, and William Appleman Williams in the later 1950s; a third generation (Tom Hayden and Lynd) also worked through the journal, which remained a crucial forum for Left debate (*LP*, 215).

people make history" (*LP*, 245). The astounding successes from Montgomery to Birmingham would have been inconceivable without the "direct mass action" they organized. Endorsing a "shift from the courts to community action," Rustin called direct action "*our most potent political weapon*." It "exerts immediate social and economic pressure, to which the South" must "accommodate," and "the more widespread [direct action] becomes, the greater will be its effectiveness as *real political action*" (*TTC*, 98). Such action is not only southern or national: "What is happening in race relations in the US is . . . happening all over the world. The dominant factor of our time is this struggle for freedom [which is] essentially anti-colonial. America, which brought her colonial subjects from Africa, cannot escape this conflict" (*LP*, 241).<sup>9</sup>

Echoing Thoreau and Luxemburg—and anticipating Occupy—he calls "direct action" a "truly total vote of infinitely greater importance than any ballot." That is partly because neither political party was committed to racial justice. But also,

when the Negro comes back from the polls he must face problems that cannot be solved by voting. Northern Negroes have had the right to vote for years without gaining economic or social equality. The same is true of most workingmen regardless of color. *More often than not, reliance on voting in periodic elections has sidetracked them from using the more powerful weapons of direct action.* (*TTC*, 101, my emphasis)<sup>10</sup>

A "minority" *must* use "protest" to end Jim Crow in the south, but because formal equality did not address the material inequality generated by labor markets and industrialization, and because that inequality harmed blacks disproportionately but not uniquely, blacks needed to imagine and seek a majoritarian movement to remake the political economy. "Sit-ins could integrate lunch counters but massive social investments and imaginative public policies were required to eliminate the deeper inequalities" (*TTC*, 192). Rustin and Randolph thus organized the 1963 March on Washington "for jobs and freedom," in that order. The original prospectus declared: "Integration in education, housing, transportation, and public accommodation will be of limited extent and duration as long as fundamental economic inequalities along *racial* lines persist." But the "glaring issue before the nation" is that "the unresolved crisis of the national economy" creates an expanding class of unskilled workers unable to secure livelihoods, let alone equality. As

<sup>9</sup> In defending direct action, Rustin expects backlash: "It is true that direct action has profoundly disturbing effects within a locality. To a large extent, however, the fears roused are modified and ultimately dispelled if the action is non-violent." Still, "the fact that resistance to injustice is disturbing cannot be the basis for inaction and submission" (*TTC*, 98).

<sup>10</sup> "There is something fantastically unreal and at the same time tragic about fighting desperately at the risk of one's livelihood and even life itself to gain admission to a polling booth in a typical southern state, and then having to use this hard won achievement to indicate a choice between the present Democratic and Republican Parties," neither avowing any commitment to racial justice or civil rights (*TTC*, 101).

this class is mostly white though disproportionately Black, so blacks and whites can join around “a broad and fundamental program of economic justice” (LP, 328).

On the one hand, Rustin sees that most blacks want “integration into American institutions, for good and ill, as they now exist.” But “what the American Negro now wants to achieve with non-revolutionary objectives cannot in fact be achieved” without “going beyond advocacy of civil rights” to seek a “democratic constitutional revolution in economic and social life” (TTC, 131). The “objective fact” is that even marginal improvements in standards of living requires “revolutionary” change to “refashion our political economy” (LP, 400). On the other hand, “the Negro people do not have the political power to create full employment alone” (LP, 395). The “objective” interest of blacks thus requires a program “that will help all Americans.” The political or strategic conclusion of Rustin’s argument is that “the future of the Negro struggle depends on whether . . . a coalition of progressive forces . . . becomes the effective majority politically.” Black well-being requires not “moral appeal” to “white conscience” about uniquely black inequalities and suffering, but appeal to the “interests” of white workers “in social insurance, medical care, mortgage support, access to education for their children.” Social justice can be advanced only if “social and economic security” is “inextricably entangled” with civil rights around racial injustice (LP, 401). This possibility could emerge, he argues, if the Democratic Party shed Dixiecrats and joined blacks, liberals, and the white working class.

#### **Down at the Crossroads: Rustin’s Turning Point**

In April 1960, Rustin, Ella Baker, and a younger generation of activists created the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to conduct grassroots organizing outside the hierarchical church-centric model of the SCLC. By 1964, SNCC organizers had formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to contest the segregated delegation to the Democratic Party convention. Rustin hoped the threat of demonstrations could leverage their seating, but in intense negotiations with Martin Luther King, Lyndon Johnson promised a real voting rights act only if the MFDP backed off; in a compromise that Rustin endorsed, two MFDP delegates were seated. Reflecting later, he said the MFDP “played a revolutionary role both within the civil rights movement and within the Democratic Party.” It “demonstrated beyond a doubt *that politics and protest could be combined intelligently*.” He also credited why activists were enraged by the compromise he endorsed: “Those kids, who had been shot at, beaten up, brutalized, seen their buddies murdered, could scarcely have been prepared to accept compromise. To a certain extent I would have been very disappointed in them if they had. . . . I understood them perfectly, but to understand is not to say they are right.” Indeed SNCC “lost its usefulness” when the Democratic Party said, “All right, you’ve won, come on in,” but SNCC remained the aggrieved protester: “the door was ajar but they insisted on standing outside and refused to enter” (LP, 391–92).

Rustin had always stood outside formal structures and established institutions, but here he seems to abandon his prior political self and the “mass direct action” he once called political. On the one hand, he elided specifically *racial* injustice to put ostensibly common *class* interests in the foreground, thereby to secure white support for remaking the Democratic Party and the political economy. On the other hand, he separated “protest” from a “politics” he now defined in terms of “power” equated with party, coalition, and public policy enacted by the state. This redefinition presumed several related ideas: first, that racial justice—and improvement in black lives—required remaking capitalism, and second, that the class interest of whites would trump (and in time efface) their investment in whiteness. Claiming that appeals to *interest* would overcome the emotional appeal of *identity*, he insisted, “The question is not whether [the white working class] is conservative or liberal, for it is both, and how it acts will depend upon the way the issues are defined. If they are defined as race and dissent, then Nixon will win. But if . . . they are defined to appeal to the progressive economic interests of the lower middle class, then it becomes possible to build an alliance on . . . common interests” (*TTC*, 254). In turn, his third key idea is that “racial affinities or hostilities are not rooted” in the heart; rather, “social, political, economic institutions are the ultimate molders of collective sentiments,” and as these are remade “the ineluctable gradualism of history will form new attitudes on race” (*LP*, 400). Trying to “change hearts” therefore is not a viable political strategy, which must assume that internal change only follows—but *will* follow, slowly but surely—change in institutions.

I would say Rustin’s shifting focus shows contrasting conceptions of politics being placed in the background or foreground, but he depicts a sequence in which one conception is tied to maturity and realism. Whereas his earlier organizing had taken an antimajoritarian form because white supremacy was popular sovereignty, he now insists that the Democratic Party is the best vehicle to mobilize and empower a class-based majority that includes blacks. By this argument he makes the nation the stage or venue of “politics,” but he does not speak of nationhood (of “America”) as a passionate attachment. He does not narrate a jeremiad of first principles betrayed or invoke the true meaning of “America” that a new New Deal could realize; indeed he does not use a language of belonging or identity at all, only of common interest. The practice of direct action and idioms of attachment, as well as the symbolic and expressive aspects of politics more broadly, all seem moved to the background, as if secondary to building a progressive party on the basis of a common “class” interest in social and material forms of equality.<sup>11</sup>

11 Rustin’s famous 1965 essay begins with an assessment of the accomplishments of the civil rights movement. “In de-segregating public accommodations, we affected institutions which are relatively peripheral both to the American socio-economic order and to the fundamental conditions of life of the Negro people.” For “what is the value of winning access to public accommodations for those who lack the money to use them? The minute the movement faced this question, it was compelled to expand its vision beyond race relations to economic relations [and] education.” At issue is “not *civil rights* strictly speaking, but . . . refashioning our political economy.” Employment, housing, education are “interrelated problems” that “require government



### Rustin and "Black Power"

In 1964 Rustin also addressed white audiences about insurrection in urban ghettos and activists openly seeking "Black power," and despite his own emphatic criticism of both, he also insisted, "We must see to it that in rejecting 'Black power' we do not also reject the principle of Negro equality" (*LP*, 429). *Always* putting Black Power in scare quotes, he ironized the rhetoric and even mocked it, yet he insisted that blacks needed to assert equality and create power.

"Black Power" as a trope, rallying cry and activist movement emerged because the civil rights movement destroyed the "psychological assumptions"—such as deference and self-hatred—that once sustained Jim Crow, but also because this emergent sense of entitlement still confronted enormous obstacles to respect, equality, and material well-being. Moreover, the failure of white liberals to criticize the limits of liberalism or to credit the reality of black oppression confirmed black isolation, hopelessness, and rage. This impasse, Rustin argued, generated "black power" among the younger generation. Thus "the Watts riot marked the first major rebellion of Negroes against their own masochism and was carried on with the express purpose of asserting they would no longer quietly submit to the deprivation of slum life." (*LP*, 420; *TTC*, 130). He credited the "subjective" aspect of what he called a revolutionary process: "We use the word revolution" because "the Negro subjectively, inwardly, psychologically declares himself a man, no longer looks upon himself as an inferior." But *revolutionary* also means "the qualitative transformation of fundamental institutions more or less rapidly," and he denied that Black Power could do that. Depicting Black Power as "a cry of disappointment" over the failure of "liberalism to move beyond legal equality" and of party politics to improve daily life in urban ghettos, he attributed its "popularity" to "the growing conviction that the Negroes cannot win—a conviction with much grounding in experience." Rustin insisted that the assumption of intractability was both self-fulfilling and self-defeating; it isolated blacks, advanced the fantasy that "the Negro can solve his problems by himself," and alienated the white allies needed to actually improve their circumstances. Accordingly, "I contend not only that black power lacks any real value for the civil rights movement, but that its propagation is positively harmful." It is a symptomatic, merely compensatory politics because "internal" focus on the segregated black community and "symbolic" expression of grievance cannot change the political economy, while alienating the white support necessary for doing so. Still, white failure sealed the

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action—or politics." Therefore "what began as a protest movement [to achieve full *opportunity*] is being challenged to translate itself into a political movement concerned with achieving *equality*." Because "20 million black people cannot win political power alone," an "*effective* political majority" makes coalition and thus "compromise" "inescapable." As if to explain his support of the compromise at the 1964 convention, he adds, "The difference between expediency and morality in politics is the difference between selling out a principle and making smaller concessions to win larger ones" (*TTC*, 118–19, 124, 121, 126).

trap: "it is up to the liberal movement to prove that coalition and integration are better alternatives."<sup>12</sup>

As D'Emilio notes, "Rustin found the style and content of the new black militancy viscerally repellent. He saw in it a repudiation of his whole life experience, and of values at the core of who he was" (*LP*, 449). Which values? Surely his revolutionary humanism denied the claims of racial identity. Those who argue that "blacks must be guided in their actions by consciousness of themselves as a separate race," he claimed, "are generally romantics, steeped in the traditions of their own particular clans and preoccupied with . . . verities of blood and racial survival." In turn, such claims denied his faith that "the other person could be reached and won over," a faith anchored not only in his religiosity but also in his marxian premise that "as soon as you move into economic struggle you're in a . . . universal ball game with universal objectives" (*LP*, 449). Equality requires organizing "on the basis of common economic *interests* not by virtue of *racial affinity*" (*TTC*, 234, my emphasis).

But Rustin also discerned a secret solidarity between what he called "no-win militancy" and the white establishment. The "purpose of the protest . . . would seem to be not so much to pursue an end as to establish in the minds of the protesters (and of whites) the reality of their protest. *Protest, therefore, becomes an end in itself and not a means toward social change.* . . . Black rebellion is an enormously *expressive* phenomenon, releasing pent-up resentment . . . but protest that is *oblivious to political reality* and not structured by *instrumental* goals is mere bombast" (*TTC*, 229–30, my emphasis). Finding "no forces prepared to move toward radical solutions . . . they conclude the only viable strategy is shock; above all, the hypocrisy of white liberals must be exposed." These "spokesmen" are not radicals, therefore, but "moralists" who "seek to change white hearts—by traumatizing them." This way of at once disavowing and yet engaging whites mistakenly locates politics in "changing hearts." Both "the breast-beating white" and "the Negro who swears 'black is beautiful'" attribute inequality to "bad [individual] attitudes"—hypocrisy or aversion—rather than to "bad social conditions," and thus "seek refuge in psychological solutions to social questions" (*TTC*, 231). The militancy becomes "a matter of posture and volume rather than effect."<sup>13</sup>

12 Quotes from "'Black Power' and Coalition Politics," *Commentary*, September 1966, 35, 38. Rustin depicts forms of black nationalism and black separatism as recurring features in African American political thought: "I have seen such nationalistic turns and withdrawals back into the ghetto before," when "conditions led to despair over the goal of integration and to the belief that the ghetto would last forever." During the long nadir, Garvey organized "the largest mass movement ever to take root among working class Negroes" in response to pervasive and understandable despair (36–37). Rustin thus notes that "it took countless beatings and 24 jailings—and the absence of strong and continual support from the liberal community—to persuade Stokely Carmichael that his earlier faith in coalition politics was mistaken, that nothing was to be gained by working with whites" (38).

13 Assertions of racial self-determination were gendered in ways Rustin found disturbing. Says D'Emilio: "He had no use for the exaggerated masculinity of the new black radicalism" (*LP*, 449). But as early as 1962 Rustin also emphasized that universality was grounded in com-

In contrast, he argued, an “effective” political program had to organize around the terms of livelihood in the class structure of an industrial economy. That is “the only way for the black lumpen-proletariat to become a proletariat” while dealing “simultaneously with black rage and white fear” (*TTC*, 252). If “the republican ascendancy is to be other than a passing phenomenon,” and if “black liberation” is not to be merely “a dream in the souls of an oppressed people,” he said in 1968, “those who favor social progress” must see “that the Democratic Party is still the only mass-based political organization in the country with the potential to become a majority movement for social change. And anything calling itself by the name of political activity must be concerned with building precisely such a majority movement” (*TTC*, 255, 235). Otherwise “the democratic left will be consigned to permanent minority status” (*TTC*, 235–36).

Rustin’s strategic claims seem inseparable from a paternalistic and patronizing tone: after decades of direct action as a prodigy-son under father-figures Muste and Randolph, he now stepped into the father’s shoes, correcting wayward children, whose forms of direct action (including riot, self-defense, community building, swaggering masculinity) he reduced to “a child’s tantrums” (*TTC*, 141). It is no surprise that a generation of younger male activists felt a sense of betrayal that an exemplary rebel had become a judgmental father—and to defend the Democratic Party of LBJ, as if Rustin required them to surrender to the real (white) father. But profound theoretical and political differences were charged with this oedipal affect; or, better, oedipal conflict carried profoundly contrasting organizing fantasies and fantasies of organizing, which underwrote their claims about what is real, possible, effective, worthy, and mature.<sup>14</sup>

In public debates with Rustin, Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael denied his key assumptions: first, his “economics-first approach” elides the structural and emotional basis of white supremacy as a regime dividing workers, while devaluing how equality for blacks requires organizing as a political body to create and leverage group power; second, though “coalition politics” flows from his social

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mon class interest and jeopardized by assertions of particular identity. By extension, he denied the value of ethnic representation as such: “The relevant question is not whether a politician is black or white, but what forces he represents.” As “an innovation to strengthen democratic participation, community control is to be applauded, but as ethnic separation for the purpose of ‘self-determination,’ it cemented both inequality and segregation.” Without “massive programs,” community control is “an adjustment to inequality” that only “changes the racial composition of who administers community institutions” (*TTC*, 224).

<sup>14</sup> Rustin thus offered a quite ambivalent assessment of Malcolm X. “Now that he is dead, we must resist the temptation to idealize him, to elevate charisma to greatness. History’s judgment of him will surely be ambiguous. His voice and words were cathartic. . . . With rare skill and feeling he articulated angry subterranean moods more widespread than any of us like to admit.” As “large sections of the negro working class were being driven into the ‘underclass’ and made part of the rootless mass by the vicissitudes of the economy, he articulated the frustration and anger of these masses, and they admired his outspoken attack on the racists and white hypocrites.” “But having described the evil, he had no program for attacking it” (*TTC*, 180–81).

democratic premises, it is not a realistic strategy but a fantasy of interracial collaboration whose effect is protecting white power and securing black subordination; third, the Democratic Party is an instrument of white supremacy and capitalist rule, not revolutionary change.

His critics begin with the counterclaim that blacks are not workers who happened to be called black, as if race merely obscured (or “divided”) a common class, but are marked subjects denied the status of humanity presumed by white workers (and women). Blackness denotes not a high degree of labor exploitation but the fungibility of an object or vessel available for *any* use, meaning, or violence. American society is surely divided by class but also by a state of exception in which some are racially marked, devalued, and subjected to violence, as a condition of life and liberty for others who are deemed white and endowed with citizenship. This racial regime emerged from and continues the global colonialism that has differentiated whose lives count as real and worthy. From this perspective, Rustin’s national-popular strategy is not realistic but fantastical, not even improbable.

Whereas for Rustin a “conviction” of intractability is based in experience but self-defeating in its effects, for his critics sober clarity about the racial state was a condition of possibility, not despair, passivity, or defeat. For them, collective acts by a “black” collective subject are not therapeutic consolation but a generative politicization. Because national politics, party representation, and state agencies inflict real harm while encouraging acquiescent forms of respectability, formerly enslaved people should define themselves not as a minority within a civic nation, as Rustin argued, but as a colony in a historical relation to an empire always making race into capital and sovereignty. Whereas Rustin thus saw past as prologue to a future built pragmatically by radicalizing a New Deal legacy, Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party organized locally to create national organizations and affiliate across nations in anticolonial, diasporic terms. By analogizing Vietnam to Lowndes County, Harlem, and Oakland as colonial spaces of an empire, they rejected his organizing fantasy of a progressive nation-state acting in the name of equality, and they construed local struggle as cosmopolitan anticolonialism.<sup>15</sup>

Here then is a bridge to Rustin’s New Left critics, who object to the silence about empire that seemed crucial to his investment in the Democratic Party and progressive reform. Empire bridged the sovereign violence and unequal development of a “racial state” entwined with a global color line, and the bureaucratic power of a centralized “corporate state” and “military-industrial complex.” Black Power and New Left advocates thus forged parallel projects of self-determination

15 For his Black Power critics, control of local police, schools, and services, as well as ethnic representation in places that concentrated black folk, addressed certain kinds of domination if not every form of inequality, and generated group power to leverage public policy. But for Rustin, localism only cemented unequal development, and he thus posited the egalitarian value of a national party using the sovereign state to control markets and dismantle local tyrannies.

as each linked ideas of existential authenticity and participation to remaking democratic forms of popular sovereignty. Conversely, Rustin feared that his social democratic project would be undone both by a fateful dialectic between black militancy and white backlash, and by an antiwar movement that divided the Democratic Party. Either or both would doom his aspiration to endow egalitarian social reform with hegemonic authority.

### Empire and Democracy

Imagine that in June 1965 Rustin was standing inside the White House with MLK as LBJ signed the Voting Rights Act, while former colleagues in the peace movement and important figures in the emerging antiwar movement stand outside in mute protest against the recent deployment of 200,000 more troops in Vietnam. In his critique of Rustin's progressivism, Lynd wrote from that position, which Rustin had inhabited only a few years before.<sup>16</sup>

Lynd makes two criticisms. First, Rustin exaggerated the liberalism of the Democratic Party to make it seem a plausible vehicle for social reform. Rustin's party project means endorsing "coalition with the marines" and with the military-industrial complex, because the premise of the Democratic Party (indeed of both parties) was an imperial foreign policy in the name of defeating communism and defending freedom (Lynd, "Coalition Politics or Nonviolent Revolution," 18). Second, Rustin's strategy would absorb the civil rights movement "into the establishment, just as the labor movement was co-opted at the end of the 30s" (18). His project—launched by the fateful compromise with LBJ in 1964—entailed the "elitism that Bayard has been fighting all his life, in which rank and file persons cease to act on their own behalf but instead are merely represented [on the] assumption that major political decisions are made by deals between representatives of interests" (18–19). SNCC and SDS thus shared "a new emphasis on 'participatory democracy' . . . people making decisions for themselves," which also meant opposing American imperial power in general, and the war in Vietnam in particular.<sup>17</sup>

Reducing Rustin's progressivism to "public works planning" and "top-down" reform, Lynd defends "revolution" by inflecting Rustin's own distinction between protest and politics: "Participatory democrats, as they move from direct action into politics, insist that direct action must continue along with politics, so that there comes into being a new politics, which forces the representative back to his people, and politics back to life" (Lynd, "Coalition Politics or Nonviolent Revo-

16 Staughton Lynd, "Coalition Politics or Nonviolent Revolution," *Liberation*, June-July 1965.

17 At issue in the Lynd-Rustin debate is how to interpret the New Deal: for Lynd, democracy had been sacrificed to national security and a consumer culture sustained by military Keynesianism; for Rustin, the New Deal installed ideas of social equality that needed to be universalized to blacks and extended to housing, health, and education.

lution,” 19). Because Lynd rejects remaking the Democratic Party, he imagines Rustin asking: is your revolutionary rhetoric mere “posturing,” or “do you have a strategy?” (19). Lynd’s answer is best characterized as the organizing fantasy of radical democracy, which always shadows and haunts the organizing fantasy of progressivism.

He imagines “thousands of people” withdrawing allegiance from the corporate state order and instead “recognizing the authority of alternative institutions of their own making.” He imagines a parallel polis, on the model of the MFDP—alternate juries and school boards, sheriffs, tax collectors, and representative organizations. “Just as the first Continental Congress was convened by committees of correspondence, so these organizations might send out a call: ‘Our government no longer represents us; let us come together to consult on what needs to be done.’” In turn, seceding dissenters could constitute a new “continental congress” that “could begin to govern” (Lynd, “Coalition Politics or Nonviolent Revolution,” 20–21). Construing radical democracy in the American grain, he claims that “the value of these imaginings” is to “break up the concept of ‘revolution’ as a monolithic, unitary event and remind us that revolution begins as the decisions of individuals to say no, and take a first step.”<sup>18</sup>

Rustin never responded directly to Lynd, but six months later (November 1965) he joined Irving Howe and Michael Harrington in a letter concerning “Vietnam protest” published in the *New York Review of Books*. They say they are critics of US policy, but their letter is devoted to criticizing the antiwar movement. To gain broad support, it must make the goal “to end a cruel and futile war, not to give . . . political support to the Vietcong. This is a tactical necessity and moral obligation, since any ambiguity on this score makes impossible, as well as undeserved, the support of large numbers of Americans.” In addition, opposition to the war should not be organized around “an analysis” of American imperialism but should focus pragmatically on generating support to end it. Turn your “vague and unfocused” demand to “stop the war” into proposals for a ceasefire and negotiations. Lastly, civil disobedience cannot be justified by analogy with black struggle: blacks are killed or jailed for trying to exercise legal rights to assemble and vote, whereas antiwar activists can protest the war, as well as a government that, unlike Jim Crow states, was elected democratically. Lynd responded that “analysis” does matter: seeking a ceasefire is not a pragmatic step because imperialism is the issue and withdrawal of American troops is nonnegotiable for Hanoi (and for protesters). In turn, whereas his critics opposed the Viet Cong because “communists” are “total-

18 Lynd also claimed that “the American civil war, our closest approach to revolution, began with solitary decisions to defy Congress and the Supreme Court and to succor fugitive slaves.” The Underground Railroad did indeed signal a parallel polis, but the Civil War surely involved a violence Lynd claims to reject, and the use of state power in Reconstruction was closer to Rustin’s sense that black self-organizing is not enough.

itarian,” Lynd analogized Vietnam and the United States with American colonies rejecting the British Empire. Finally, Johnson won the 1964 election by promising to end the war, and he had acted unconstitutionally in escalating it.

As D’Emilio concludes, “The claims that Lynd made against Rustin came to seem credible” after 1964 (*LP*, 416).

The irony in these arguments was immense. Rustin had shaped his public career by steadfastly advocating Gandhian nonviolence and had worked in pacifist organizations for more than two decades. He had chosen jail rather than fight in a war against fascism and had dissented from American militarism at the height of the cold war, when the voices of dissent were few. . . . Now, as a popular mass movement was building against American military action abroad, Rustin was choosing to avoid the issue. Having stood apart from society as a radical pacifist, he was now standing apart from pacifism just when a cry for peace was reaching millions. (*LP*, 439)

Rustin’s old allies (most notably Martin Luther King Jr.) reconsidered their loyalties to Johnson and the war, but Rustin remained silent. Many remained insurgents within the Democratic Party, and within the union movement that uncritically supported the war, by linking militarism to economic injustice and racism and thus by linking antiwar sentiment to domestic social reform. Some embraced a more radical political marginality. But, Rustin insisted, withdrawing from party politics or weakening, let alone dividing, the Democratic Party (by supporting McCarthy rather than Humphrey) would benefit only the Republicans, who carried “the threat of American apartheid” (*LP*, 469).

It would seem he was driven to disavow the meaning of the Vietnam War—and betray his lifelong commitment to the revolutionary humanism of nonviolence—to preserve his Gramscian dream of a national-popular movement carried by the Democratic Party, but he also knew that the defeat of that dream meant a new Jim Crow. D’Emilio also speculates that a lifetime of stigma around his sexuality—justifying repeated exclusion from public, let alone leadership roles in organizations he had founded—left Rustin critical of “left-wing romanticization about marginality” and determined to secure a political base.<sup>19</sup>

19 D’Emilio speculates that whereas straight people on the Left could afford or tolerate political forms of marginality because they remained anchored in normative private lives and relations, “in 1963 [Rustin] was 51 years old, without a long-term intimate relationship and at least politically, he was searching for something more than a place at the periphery.” That search also reflected the fact that “there was a level of invective, a tone of scorn directed at Rustin that went beyond political disagreement.” As ostracism because of his sexuality repeatedly isolated him, it may have contributed to the intensity of his attachment to the union movement and the Democratic Party. John D’Emilio, “Homophobia and the Trajectory of Postwar American Radicalism: The Career of Bayard Rustin,” *Radical History Review* 62 (1995).

### Conclusion: Rustin's Legacy

As his fear in 1968 suggests, Rustin anticipated the end of the long civil rights project that unfolded in tandem and tension with New Deal / Cold War liberalism. New Left critique presumed the uncontested hegemony of New Deal liberalism, which it cast as “elitist” and managerial, not only racial and imperial. But the Republican Party organized racial backlash, soon sanitized as a defense of local rule and popular sovereignty against the demonic triangle of a “liberal” state that served blacks and women at the expense of white men. New Left critique of bureaucratic rule, aimed at “liberal” reformers of a corporate state, was thus captured by a “New Right” claiming to defend local sovereignty and markets—and so freedom—against “liberal” elites and “big government.” Rustin’s progressive project and the organizing fantasies of its Black Power and New Left critics were displaced by another project—once called neoconservative or new right, now called neoliberal—to remake the party, state, and political economy.<sup>20</sup>

It thus seems impossible to judge Rustin’s judgments and actions without telling a story about race and empire exploding postwar liberalism, as well as about the still-undigested legacy of this moment. As he made emphatically critical judgment of the Black Power and antiwar movements, and emphatically hopeful judgment of a progressive (Gramscian) possibility he lodged in the Democratic Party, and as their emphatic critiques of its impossibility bespoke a contrary horizontalism harnessed to confidence in the world-historical progress of anticolonialism, so our assessment of their organizing fantasies and judgments inescapably reflects how we envision our *own* moment. That question requires its own essay, but we can focus here on Rustin’s trajectory and consider what the tale rather than the teller might teach us.

I would return to the idea of argumentative traditions and my claim is that the canons of democratic theory and black political thought have been shaped by tension between “progressive” visions of state-centric social change focused on the nation and “horizontal,” decentralized visions of participatory practice. As we traced Rustin’s shift from one modality of politics to the other, he split “protest” from “politics,” which meant splitting the ruptural and agonal from the institutional, and the symbolic and expressive from the material and instrumental. By his powerful (but also deceptive) metaphor, because of “protest” the “door was

20 Recent arguments on the Left narrate this history very differently. The first important argument (echoing Rustin, and initiated by Richard Rorty and Todd Gitlin) was that “identity politics” had both fragmented and marginalized the Left by alienating white workers, whereas in contrast, “cultural studies” and the academic Left abandoned formal politics and state power. According to a second and more recent argument (appearing among Sanders supporters and in *Jacobin*) is that white workers did not reject a party identified with racial liberalism (and thus unfair taxation of deserving producers to unjustly indulge the undeserving poor) but that the Democratic Party became neoliberal and abandoned the economic interests of the (white) working class.



ajar,” but activists refused compromise, the price of the ticket to enter, and questioned integration into what Baldwin called a burning house. They refused the long march through institutions, he claimed, because they lacked the maturity to undertake “the slow boring of hard boards,” as Weber famously described “real” politics; but what Rustin called maturity and Weber called vocation, they called acquiescence or subordination.

Rustin’s faith in large-scale world-building, entwined with intense fear of marginalization, bespoke both Jim Crow and sexual stigma; New Left and Black Power fear of incorporation entailed faith that marginality meant not failure but participation in making an alter-world. He voiced the value of compromise and institution building; they remind us that institutions always warrant suspicion and that the “means” we use are always ends in the making. In that sense they affirmed the revolutionary humanism that had birthed him. These organizing fantasies have been translated into inverse moral allegories: crossing the threshold through the open door means maturity *or* corruption; refusing to cross that threshold, remaining outside the door, means principled refusal *or* self-defeating marginality. But the polarity of the allegory obscures the internal complexity of each position—for each remains a disavowed presence in the other. My impulse is not so much to reject the moral allegory as to own and digest it, to enrich our organizing fantasies now about what (black) radicalism means and democracy requires.

My counterallegory is that modalities and dimensions of politics live inescapably in a tension we must sustain, not sever. Rather than narrate moralizing melodramas of immaturity or criminal complicity, each gaining self-validation by devaluing its other, why not credit the gifts and costs of positions in abiding tension and the difficulty of mediating them? If we craft a “tragic” vision that credits the integrity and pathos of each position—even as specific moments and contexts may require us to enact one and forgo the other—then we may not simply refight old debates to prove someone absolutely wrong; instead we might clarify recurring questions while trying to mediate the valid concerns and pathos that adversaries invest in their answers. Of course we also must credit the centrality of political judgment about context, and so about which modes of politics are especially needful or imperative in a given moment. But we would not abstractly stipulate what is truly political or truly democratic.<sup>21</sup>

It is not coincidental that this specific tension—between what I have called progressive or Gramscian and what I have called horizontal and participatory—appears not only in democratic theory but in black political thought. For, arguably, it also demonstrates two contrasting mythopoetic visions: one recurrently loosens the intractability of race as a condition of imagining the normalization of black life through social democratic projects to expand liberalism; for the other, formally

21 Do I end up like a Haemon, hoping to mediate the colliding positions of Creon and Antigone as if to avoid tragedy by offering a “tragic” vision (or “ethics”) in a fantasy of tempering the invested pathos of these protagonists?

institutionalized politics instantiates a white intractability that is best resisted by fugitive networks, communal practices of mutual aid, and counterpublics. But we also need to attend to Rustin's claim that the material circumstances of black people can be improved by shifting our orientation, not only from protest to politics but also from racial disparity to the commonality of class interest with whites. If these two shifts show the social democratic strain that runs from Rustin and Michael Harrington to Bernie Sanders, it also suggests a fraught issue, at once theoretical and political. For the operative distinction between interest and identity entails a splitting that is both misconceived and recurrently enacted. On the one hand, Rustin mistakenly (and destructively) spoke as if it were possible and desirable to sever conceptions of interest and identity, as if conceptions of interest could be separated from expressive, symbolic idioms that conjure community, solicit allegiance, bestow legitimacy, impart meaning, project purpose. He thus argued as if race was an identity category, simply symbolic, whereas class denoted actual or real material interests, when in fact class in America is thoroughly entwined with conceptions of whiteness. If we see the progressive-horizontal tension in contemporary debates about, say, Occupy and Black Lives Matter compared to party politics, we also see this splitting about race and class, identity and interest, in debates about the Bernie Sanders campaign, whose rhetoric invokes class commonality and its benefits for blacks, as Rustin's did.

Because class has never been successfully separated from race in American politics, however, Rustin's (or Sanders's) Gramscian project of a national-popular movement is fundamentally flawed. Rustin knew that "class" and "interest" are politically contingent artifacts dependent on what Laclau and Mouffe soon called "articulation," but he used the idiom of interest as if it self-evidently resolved—rather than evaded—the fact of race, the racialization of class. For this reason the 2016 Sanders campaign could not recruit people of color, while its defenders repeated Rustin's claim that race is a chosen identity that fragments class solidarity and substitutes therapeutic compensation for real—that is, material—interests. His 2020 campaign digested this experience and diversified staff and rhetoric, but the results in primaries so far have not significantly changed the 2016 percentages among older voters, though younger voters of color have expressed increased support. What, then, would it mean to begin democratic theory—and a politics committed to equality—with race?<sup>22</sup>

Rustin's mistaken premise was that Jim Crow had been put in the past, so that blacks should focus on capitalism, not apartheid. As a deskilled lumpenproletariat, they needed the state programs to generate training and employment as a unionized proletariat. But if we begin with a racial state of exception imposing social or civic death on subjects marked black, then "disparity" (in employment,

22 I cannot explore here the nuances in the ways that black theorists and white leftists argue about class and race, but accounts of "racial capitalism" offer fruitful avenues for mediating positions once opposed.

say) is a sanitized name for symptoms of a social (caste) structure. Some disparities can in principle be remedied by social democratic projects, but the fungibility of social death—manifest as pervasive disposability, symbolic hyper-visibility, and gratuitous violence—can be addressed only if whites credit how institutional racialization and generalized dishonor sustain a caste system. That caste system precluded inclusion in a unionized proletariat as well as a national-popular mobilization on a class basis. *All* democratic norms have been contaminated by this structure of racial exception; rule of law and majority rule, rules of public reason, codes of responsibility, idioms of individual rights, popular sovereignty, and local self-determination have been instruments of white supremacy, not (only) antidotes to it.

But no self-evident political conclusion is entailed by this argument about race. For Rustin was thinking about race and not only class when he warned that localized decentralization in fact cements inequality, which means that equality requires centralized state power and nationalized rights enforced locally, just as black empowerment during Reconstruction lasted only so long as an interventionist federal state was militant and partisan. “Radical democrats” who demonize democratic sovereignty, a central (or national) state, and party politics (to mediate them) thereby cede enormous power to the Right but also secure its racial regime. A *relation between* what Rustin called “protest” and “politics”—what I instead would call two modalities of politics—thus seems essential if we are to address pervasive police violence, unemployment, and mass incarceration. If our organizing fantasy of democratic politics must rework rather than reject forms of sovereignty, however, it also remains imperative to enable participation in shaping practices of livelihood, forms of representation, and sites of expression. If we begin with race, then, we do not evade political economy (as Rustin feared) but we can grasp how the production and definition of value and livelihood are wed to raced devaluation and violence. If we apprehend that fatal bond, we cannot avoid or sidestep the state or the challenge of organizing large-scale forms of power.

I have used Rustin and his critics to depict abiding tensions within and between two argumentative traditions—black and democratic along one axis, and progressive and horizontalist along a second axis. I have suggested the allegorical way in which Rustin and his radical critics—and we, too, now—can split and moralize these tensions. I have argued to intensify the feeling that “the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living,” whether they are “progressive” heirs of Rustin or radical heirs of Lynd and Carmichael. Still, this idea is abstract, and moralizing, if the implication is that there is some sure or self-evident way to mediate these tensions. For actual contexts often require—or drive us to—fraught consequential judgments; and in some moments, like the 1960s, intense, traumatic conflict is probably impossible to mediate by any expedient or ethos. We have lived in the impasse bequeathed by that moment; we remain stuck in the “motivated structure of disavowal” by which national politics buried a period of

crisis over race, empire, and the meaning of America. But that structure of disavowal has itself manifestly entered a crisis.

On the one hand, globalization has intensified precarity, eviscerated sustainable livelihood, and generated populist revolts in both political parties. On the other hand, formal enfranchisement, including the election of Obama, has exposed an abiding racial regime and provoked black insurgency, but also white incomprehension and panic, to a degree not seen since the 1960s. The entwined regimes of neoliberalism and post-civil rights colorblindness are at risk, but to what effect remains an open and political question. On the one hand, we witness resurgent racialized nationalism in response to precarity and a neoliberalized Democratic Party, but also to apparent racial advance and white displacement by immigration. And on the other hand, despite widespread academic claims that we live in the ruins of inherited romances of radicalism—Rustin’s progressivism and its radical (New Left and anticolonial) critics—we can see the grip of our inherited allegory in the organizing fantasies animating Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and most recently of and by the Bernie Sanders campaign. *How* we conceive our moment now, and *if* we can make it a condition of possibility, still depends on how we rework—and relate—the argumentative traditions we inherit. Do we update Rustin’s arguments and reoccupy party and state to remake the political economy? Do we dismiss that organizing fantasy as impossible and instead slowly build a parallel (and sustainable) polis of horizontally related localisms, as his critics hoped? If we make precarious livelihood the ground of commonality, can we also credit the global color line, instantiated by a racial state of exception inhabited by upwards of fifty million people in the United States? If we model the lifetime of Rustin’s political work, not his tale about it, the answer is surely yes.

## 20: Ralph Ellison

### Democratic Theorist

Danielle Allen

I consider Ralph Ellison one of the greatest democratic theorists of the twentieth century. One could make that case from either his collected essays or his novel *Invisible Man* (1952).<sup>1</sup>

In the Declaration of Independence, the American experiment in democratic government was launched on the basis of a disjunction between a stated recognition of the universal natural rights of human beings and a simultaneous assignment of control over the powers of government to white men with property. When John Adams was challenged about this disjunction by his wife and, separately, a fellow revolutionary, he made the argument (to paraphrase) that placing power in the hands of male property holders was a reasonable way to assure the well-being of all. History has decidedly disconfirmed that hypothesis. The only path to securing the rights of all is that power be placed in the hands of all.<sup>2</sup>

To achieve such a world, democratic theorists have been obliged first to articulate the often unspoken concepts that shored up the disjunctive structure of the original liberal claim that while all have rights, not all should have power. Second, they have needed to rebuild the conceptual foundations of rights-based representative democracy to explain how democracies and democratic cultures can and will function when all have power. Third, they have to provide a psychologically and institutionally plausible account of how we can transition our organizations and social practices from the arrangements that grew out of the first, unstable, disjunctive conceptualization of democracy to a new, stable, and harmonized conceptualization of the relationship between rights and power.

In both his essays and *Invisible Man*, Ellison did all three of these things. With the idea of “invisibility,” he gave a name to the social role that had been assigned to people of color, and to a lesser extent to women, in the original American social contract. This term, in other words, served as a key for unlocking what the original conceptual structure had actually been. Alongside the concept of “invisi-

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a revised and expanded version of Danielle Allen, “Ralph Ellison on the Tragi-comedy of Citizenship,” in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to “Invisible Man”* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 37–57. Used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> See Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (New York: Liveright, 2014).

bility,” Ellison also offered up a social theory of how social ritual serves to anchor even an unstable conceptual foundation for a society; see the rituals and you see the structure and conceptual content of any given polity’s underlying social contract. With concepts such as these (“invisibility” and “ritual”), he rewrote American history and democratic theory to make African Americans a necessary part of both. This comes out most clearly in his 1970 essay “What America Would Be Like without Blacks.” In brief, America would not be. The even more important point, however, is that the stories both of what America is and of what democracy is must shift once the formerly invisible elements of those stories have been incorporated. Inclusion of the invisible doesn’t leave the original visible structure or narrative intact but transforms it. The visible is first redescribed from the perspective of the invisible, and then the two narratives must somehow be reconciled and integrated into a new fusion, which makes the new narrative about what America and democracy are quite different from the old narrative.

Second, Ellison rebuilds the conceptual foundations of rights-based representative democracy by conjuring a vision for an authentically loving relationship among members of a democracy. Here the key texts are his National Book Award acceptance speech (1953) and “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” (1978–79). The important lesson is that if all who are affected by a decision, even the “little man at Chehaw Station,” are visible—that is, in fact included in the decision-making—the odds of a successful and durable positive outcome are greater. This is not merely because the outcome will be fairer if all who are affected are included in its development. It is also because it will be epistemically stronger by integrating the perspective of the so-called little man. Because the “little man” has had to look at democracy from its underside, he is an expert in what is wrong with it and could be better. He is the best judge there is of how democracy is performing and therefore a source of knowledge the polity needs if it is going to perfect its democratic art. Not only will decisions that fold in the perspective of the little man be better and more stable; they will also create a culture that will be necessarily dynamic and hybridizing. This is because new perspectives must constantly be accommodated. Embracing true democracy requires comfort with perpetual cultural change.

Finally, there is the matter of the psychology of change and of achieving comfort with it. In both his essays and his fiction, Ellison was always clear-eyed that the original social contract had been cemented by power and that a new social contract could emerge only if society itself could invent and broadly adopt new ideas about power itself—and its distribution and use—and address the stiff resistance to be expected from those asked to make a transition from a position of superiority to one of equality. He explored the psychology of the relinquishment of privilege before anyone was calling it that. His central psychological strategy involved opening up spaces for the powerful to laugh at themselves, while others laughed with and not at them, and in so doing helping them walk away from their former selves. Perhaps the most important text here is the essay “An Extravagance

of Laughter" (1985). For people to give up power without joining the forces of a revanchist rearguard, they need a chance to save face. This is not a popular view at present, but I'm not sure anyone else has yet found a more effective pathway to a nonviolent rebalancing of power relations.

In these introductory remarks I have highlighted some of Ellison's essays that I have found particularly helpful in coming to understand his theory of democracy and political theory more broadly. In what follows I focus on how he used his fiction to make and convey these theoretical arguments. Remarkably, he did so without ever compromising the quality of the fiction as such. In footnotes I indicate where the theoretical import of the novel is mirrored by explicit argumentation in the essays. One might also reverse the process and write an essay that outlines the thought in the essays, with supporting footnotes drawn from the novel. In other words, the essays and the fiction are that closely connected to one another. They are of a single weave and together, in my view, establish Ellison as one of the greatest democratic theorists of the twentieth century.

### Where Are the Politics in *Invisible Man*?

Ellison's novel has been caught up in political questions ever since it appeared. Irving Howe criticized Ellison fiercely for not having written a protest novel; his interests seemed, in the 1950s and early 1960s, far too aesthetic.<sup>3</sup> But recently, and especially since Ellison's death in 1994, a spate of critics have turned toward analysis of the democratic theory that provides the backbone for Ellison's novels and extensive criticism.<sup>4</sup> And when I discussed the book with a retiree read-

3 Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent*, Autumn 1963. Cf. Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug" (1963–64), in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 155–88. For another example of this critical perspective, see Donald B. Gibson, *The Politics of Literary Expression: A Study of Major Black Writers* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1981). On the political critiques of Ellison, see Larry Neal, "Ellison's Zoot Suit," in *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Hershey (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974), 58–79 [repr. from *Black World* 20, no. 2, (December 1970): 31–50], and Morris Dickstein, "Ralph Ellison, Race, and American Culture," *Raritan* 18, no. 4 (1999): 30–50.

4 Two scholars in particular have been building a body of work in this area: Meili Steele ("Metatheory and the Subject of Democracy," *New Literary History* 27, no. 3 [1996]: 473–502; "Democratic Interpretation and the Politics of Difference," *Comparative Literature* 48, no. 4 [1996]: 326–42; "Arendt versus Ellison on Little Rock: The Role of Language in Political Judgment," *Constellations* 9, no. 2 [2002]: 184–206) and Kenneth Warren ("Ralph Ellison and the Reconfiguration of Black Cultural Politics," *Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 11 [1995]: 139–57; "As White as Anybody": Race and the Politics of Counting as Black," *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2000): 709–26). There has also been a proliferation of free-standing pieces on the subject: James M. Albrecht, "Saying Yes and Saying No: Individualist Ethics in Ellison, Burke, and Emerson," *PMLA* 114, no. 1 (1999): 46–63; Timothy L. Parrish, "Ralph Ellison, Kenneth Burke, and the Form of Democracy," *Arizona Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1995): 117–48; Danielle S. Allen, "Law's Necessary Forcefulness: Ralph Ellison vs. Hannah Arendt on the Battle of Little Rock," *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 26, no. 3 (2001): 857–900; Danielle S. Allen, *Talking*

ing group, I discovered that Ellison had at last fallen from his empyrean heights and landed in the muck. These more recent readers found the book far too, and even painfully, political. There is, I think, a very specific reason for the divergence in these reactions, and this has to do with where the novel's politics are to be found.<sup>5</sup>

For all that the novel is full of scenes likely to occasion urban protest (both in the novel and in life), no single policy issue can in any way be said to orient or shape the movement of the novel. But scholars and critics interested in the novel's politics have regularly gone after just such political events and details—hence the common conversation about whether the Brotherhood is to be construed as a parody of the American Communist Party.<sup>6</sup> But our first clue about how to read the politics of the text comes from the very shadowiness of the Brotherhood party. Every time the reader, or a character, tries to focus on exactly what the Brotherhood is, the group seems to disappear; one can't fix it in one's mind. Indeed none of the members, for instance, has a last name, and their very anonymity deflects attention from them. It seems that one isn't meant to focus on a particular event or institution and that these are not the phenomena that have captured Ellison's regard. In other words, the politics of the novel is not made apparent through positions taken by characters and backed up with institutions but in some other

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to *Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since "Brown v. Board of Education"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

The best place to start with criticism of Ellison is Alan Nadel, *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988); Kimberly W. Benston., ed., *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1987); Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). The most helpful text on Ellison that I have found is Beth Eddy, *The Rites of Identity: The Religious Naturalism and Cultural Criticism of Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). She addresses sacrifice, tragedy, and comedy in Ellison, as well as many other concepts that come up in his work. On Ellison's politics and the political ideas in his writings generally (as opposed to his "democratic theory"), see Jerry Gafio Watts, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); John F. Callahan, "Frequencies of Eloquence: The Performance and Composition of *Invisible Man*," in *New Essays on "Invisible Man"*, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 55–94; Berndt Ostendorf, "Ralph Waldo Ellison: Anthropology, Modernism, and Jazz," in *New Essays on "Invisible Man"*, 95–122; Stanley E. Hyman, "Ralph Ellison in Our Time," in *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 39–42 (repr. from *New Leader* 47, no. 22 (October 26, 1964): 21–22; Barbara Foley, "Reading Redness: Politics and Audience in Ralph Ellison's Early Short Fiction," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 29, no. 3 (1999): 323–39. Except for Eddy, I have not yet come across a text that investigates Ellison's idea of sacrifice.

5 Ellison sought characters "possessing broad insight into their situations [and] the emotional, psychological, and intellectual complexity which would allow them to possess and articulate a truly democratic world view" ("Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Mask of Humanity" [1946], in *Collected Essays*, 93).

6 See, for instance, the early interviews, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview" (1955) and "On Initiation Rites and Power: A Lecture at West Point" (1969), in *Collected Essays*, 210–24, 520–41.



way. If in reading the novel one is not meant to focus on events and institutions, toward what other focus is one's political attention directed?

A reader may not be able to conjure up a clear picture of what exactly the Brotherhood is, but she can easily recall and outline the structure of the protagonist's interactions with, say, Brother Jack and Brother Hambro. Throughout the novel, conversations are rendered fully. The book is clearly about interactions between individuals, and perhaps this is the reason that *Invisible Man* at first seemed to be a book that had retreated from public political questions. Moreover, the book is not simply about any and every type of interaction; we learn next to nothing about the precollegiate family life of our unnamed protagonist, whom I've taken to calling I.M. as a nickname.<sup>7</sup> Rather, most of the conversations have something to do with what happens when strangers try to act together.<sup>8</sup> The novel thus draws our attention to the basic democratic project: strangers, with nothing but common citizenship to tie them together, are supposed to decide together and then act. How are they to do so? How *do* they do so?

Indeed Ellison brings analytical pressure to bear on the interactions between strangers, whose only relation to one another is that of common citizenship, until they tell us about the psychic lives of democratic citizens and therefore also about how the larger political body, made up of so many millions of strangers doing things with and to each other, works. In a 1945 letter to literary critic and philosopher Kenneth Burke, he described himself as "a Negro writer who writes out of his full awareness of the complexity of western personality and who presents the violence of American culture in psychological terms rather than physical ones."<sup>9</sup>

The politics in the novel lies, then, in the novel's account of what it is like, psychologically speaking, to be an individual in a democratic world of strangers,

7 I am certainly not the first. Ellison suggests it with his riff on "I am what I am" and "I yam what I yam." Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; repr. New York: Vintage 1995), 266, 269. Albert Murray confesses in a letter to Ellison, dated February 9, 1952, that he does too. "(By the way, *Invisible Man* equals IM equals I'M equals I AM. . .)." *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*, ed. Albert Murray and John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 32. All subsequent citations of *Invisible Man* will be noted parenthetically in the text by page number, and emphases are in original unless otherwise noted.

8 As many commentators have pointed out, I.M.'s relationship with Mary is the only one to which Ellison provides any strong emotional warmth. And she drops almost entirely out of the plot after a brief centrality. Repeatedly, the conversations Ellison develops involve strangers: the Reverend Barbee's encomium to the founder of the College reports on past efforts at collaboration; the union meeting at the paint factory; and I.M.'s effort to work with his quasi-mentor at that factory. All of his meetings with Brotherhood members and his experiences at the eviction, at his first public speech, and at Tod Clifton's funeral focus attention precisely on the relationships among strangers who are trying to act together. I.M.'s encounter with the young Mr. Emerson perhaps brings this theme out the best, when the young Emerson asks, "Do you believe that two people, two strangers who have never seen one another before can speak with utter frankness and sincerity? . . . Do you believe it is possible for us, the two of us, to throw off the mask of custom and manners that insulate man from man, and converse in naked honesty and frankness?" (*Invisible Man*, 186).

9 Cited in Parrish, "Ellison, Burke, and the Form of Democracy," 117.

where large-scale events are supposed to arise somehow out of one's own consent and yet never really do.<sup>10</sup> Democracy puts its citizens under a strange form of psychological pressure by building them up as sovereigns and then regularly undermining any individual citizen's experience of sovereignty. Moreover, democracies claim to secure the good of all citizens, whereas in any particular democracy there are always some people who are benefiting less than others from, or are positively harmed by, particular political decisions. The citizens who lose out in any given political battle need to find ways to reconcile their experience of loss and impotence with the notion that they are nonetheless sovereign.<sup>11</sup> *Invisible Man* addresses precisely this psychological tension, the psychic anxiety of being a powerless sovereign, and to the degree that the novel is existentialist, its existentialism is democratic.<sup>12</sup> If one reads not for protest but for character development in the novel—as the members of that retiree reading group were doing—one necessarily comes up against politics. Moreover, as we shall see, in *Invisible Man* the result of scrutinizing one individual's existential experience of democratic collaboration is a rich account of how democracy works at the level of interactions among citizens. Ellison aspired to an “imaginative integration of the total American experience.”<sup>13</sup> In short, he aspired to move from the depiction of one life to a totalizing account of democracy.

#### From Individual Experience to Democratic Facts

How, then, did Ellison think it was possible for an author to get from descriptions of an individual life and its psychic struggles to the “total American [read: democratic] experience”? Here Ellison's idea of ritual is key. From T. S. Eliot's

10 Ellison regularly makes the argument that whereas white Americans have been able to live with illusions about how democracy works, blacks in contrast “are an American people who are geared to what is, and who yet are driven by a sense of what it is possible for human life to be in this society” (“What America Would Be Like without Blacks,” 584). African Americans, in his argument, understand the ways the collective decisions of a democracy impose on some citizens. White Americans have been able to avoid that knowledge because one minority group was assigned to bear the bulk of these burdens. “When we look objectively at how the dry bones of the nation were hung together, it seems obvious that some one of the many groups that compose the United States had to suffer the fate of being allowed no easy escape from experiencing the harsh realities of the human condition as they were to exist under even so fortunate a democracy as ours” (“What America Would Be Like without Blacks,” 583); “these Americans were designated as perfect victims for sacrifice” (“Perspective of Literature,” in *Collected Essays*, 777–78). The thrust of this argument is to take the black experience of living under Jim Crow as a metaphor for a basic democratic experience of having the majority make decisions to which one does not concur and which one may even actively resent. The Jim Crow period, in this analysis, is therefore not an aberration but fundamentally revealing of some of the most difficult problems to be faced by democratic peoples.

11 Cf. Allen, “Law's Necessary Forcefulness.”

12 Nadel writes: “We can view Ellison's art, in other words, as exploring the tension between conscious America and the American unconscious.” *Invisible Criticism*, 396.

13 Ellison, “On Initiation Rites and Power,” 525.

*The Wasteland* and Lord Raglan's *The Hero* Ellison took a conviction that myth and ritual are fundamental to both human life and literature.<sup>14</sup> In fact, these are the phenomena that in his view connect particular events to broad social meanings. In his view, societies use rituals to create, justify, and maintain their social structures. These rituals may be as overt as the requirement that students say the Pledge of Allegiance in school every day or as little noticed as the adult habit of asking a child upon a first meeting, "What's your name and how old are you?"<sup>15</sup> Even the smallest interaction could serve Ellison's purpose and provide ritual elements. Indeed the narrative structure of the novel itself reveals Ellison's habit of putting pressure on small interactions in order to identify the rituals beneath them and to make them yield large, general claims about politics. Three examples will show how Ellison moves from small interactions to truths about the larger political scene. I will begin with a scene that is obviously an initiation ritual in Ellison's own terms, the Battle Royal scene, and then turn to two less obviously ritualistic moments of social interaction.

#### EXAMPLE 1: BATTLE ROYAL

The Battle Royal scene has often been identified, by Ellison himself and also by critics, as an initiation rite. Young black men are taught their impotence through it. But the scene is and does much more than that, if one attends to I.M.'s experience of it. Let us begin our examination of the scene anew.

When I.M. begins his psychological and political odyssey, he has few words to explain his sufferance of physical and moral depredations of life in the South—the little he knows is that he endures for the sake of achieving a greater part in American democracy. He expects to be the next Booker T. Washington and believes that following the rules will get him there. As a young high school and college student, he describes his stance as one of humility, which he calls "the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress" (17). Notably, humility is a character trait, not an action.<sup>16</sup> When a high school graduation oration on humility wins him much praise and an invitation to deliver the same speech before a gathering of the town's foremost white citizens, one result will be a college scholarship for

14 Ellison invokes the idea of ritual throughout his essays. For instance, in "The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner" (1968) he refers to himself as "a novelist interested in that area of national life where political power is institutionalized and translated into democratic ritual and national style" (in *Collected Essays*, 553). To piece together Ellison's account of ritual, see particularly "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," "Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States" (1964), and "On Initiation Rites and Power," in *Collected Essays*, 81–99, 210–24, 189–209, and 520–41, respectively.

15 Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," 195.

16 Notably, Kenneth Burke too was concerned to distinguish humility and humiliation. Eddy, *Rites of Identity*, 97.

I.M.; the other, his inadvertent first step toward articulating the belief that what he is describing as humility is in fact not a character trait but a chosen *action*, one that is inspired by a belief in the centrality of reciprocity to democratic politics.

On the evening appointed for I.M. to deliver his speech for the second time, the town's eminences are all drunk, nastily and lecherously so; they maul a stripteaser, who barely escapes the room unscathed, before turning to the entertainment they expect from "the shines." First there is a Battle Royal, a boxing match in which ten boys, blindfolded, are set upon each other.<sup>17</sup> I.M. too is made to participate and, along with the other boys, is first humiliated before the match by being forced to watch, while wearing scanty boxing shorts, the white woman's striptease and is then humiliated again after the match by being ordered to collect his pay in coin from a mat on the floor. (More even—the mat turns out to be electrocuted; the coins, merely buttons.) Bloodied and debased, I.M. is finally allowed to speak and begins, amid yells and laughter, in this context of *humiliation*, his paean to, of all things, *humility*. As the context for his speech has shifted, however, so too his memory has been jolted out of place, for instead of reciting, in accord with his written text, that he will devote himself to "social responsibility," I.M. resoundingly commits himself to "social equality." Ellison writes: "The laughter hung in the sudden stillness. I opened my eyes, puzzled. Sounds of displeasure filled the room. . . . 'Say that slowly son!'" Realizing his mistake, I.M. feels a flutter of fear before retracting his desire for "equality," affirming his commitment to "social responsibility," and finding himself rewarded. The men respond that they "mean to do right by [him], but [he's] got to know [his] place at all times" (31). We could call I.M.'s mistake a Freudian slip.<sup>18</sup> The psychological pressure on I.M. has led him to reveal, if only for a brief moment, the question raised by his focus on humility: How does social responsibility, obedience to laws and norms, relate to social equality or the ability to use common institutions to accrue benefit in the social and private sphere? In a democratic society, does the one not promise the other, despite his audience's refusal to acknowledge that promise?<sup>19</sup> The audience's insistence that I.M. accept social responsibility turns the narrative spotlight on the question of the sorts of political actions the invisible do in fact, despite being invisible, carry out. How can an account of citizenship be expanded to include their actions?

I.M. is being humble *in exchange* for future goods, and so he conceives of his

17 This scene has been much analyzed, partly because it was published as an excerpt of the novel before the novel appeared. See Eddy, *Rites of Identity*; Martha Nussbaum, "Invisibility and Recognition: Sophocles' Philoctetes and Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *Philosophy and Literature* 23, no. 2 (1999): 257–83.

18 Ellison certainly drew heavily on Freud. Young Emerson is reading *Totem and Taboo* when the protagonist goes to visit him (180), and Ellison's preoccupation with taboos generally and with incest in particular also draw heavily on Freud.

19 Hyman is one of the few critics to recognize the importance of "responsibility" to Ellison. "Ralph Ellison in Our Time," 39–42. See also Lucas E. Morel, "Ralph Ellison's American Democratic Individualism," in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*, 58–90.

humility as setting him in relation to the broader world of social and political interaction. The audience to his speech, however, disputes whether his humility does in fact give him grounds to consider himself a public actor. The novel therefore opens by staging a contest over how to interpret the relation between our institutionalized political obligations to one another and our everyday citizenly interactions: do we not regularly enact democratic responsibility *outside* courtrooms and assemblies? In the eerie moment when I.M. replaces the phrase “social responsibility” with the phrase “social equality,” he brings to the surface a suppressed question about how ideas like “responsibility” and “obligation” work to support democratic agreement and democratic peace.<sup>20</sup> That they do is clear; I.M. averts possible violence to himself by publicly committing himself to “responsibility.” And his audience vaguely senses that some “gift” is involved in the resulting release of tension. Wrongly, they think the gift is theirs: “We mean to do right by you, but you’ve got to know your place at all times,” they say.

The novel will, time and again, make the point that remarks such as these mistake the exchange relations involved in the democratic gift; the assumption of responsibility is, in fact, the real benefaction. Here within invisibility itself, Ellison is revealing a political act (the acceptance of obligation in the face of loss) that founds peace; what makes I.M.’s acceptance of obligation not just sustaining of political order but more specifically democratic is that his assumption of obligation is based on an expectation, however attenuated, of reciprocity. Indeed in democratic regimes those practices and habits by which citizens accept communal decisions with which they disagree must necessarily rest on highly developed structures and notions of reciprocity.<sup>21</sup> It should come as no surprise that in the literature of political theory, the topic of reciprocity always floats near the surface of discussions about democratic deliberation and agreement.<sup>22</sup> In

20 Callahan offers a similar reading. “Frequencies of Eloquence,” 64. See also Callahan, “The Lingering Question of Personality and Nation in *Invisible Man*: ‘And could politics ever be an expression of love?’,” in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*, where he makes the positive argument for fraternity and civic friendship, necessitated by the discovery of the problem of loss.

21 Ellison insists that even the politically oppressed position of African Americans in the US during the period of segregation nonetheless required that African Americans engage in systems of reciprocity. Thus he remarks on “the complexity of circumstances which go to make up the Negro experience, and which alone go to make the obvious injustice bearable” (“Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” 208).

22 Reciprocity is central to all the deliberative democracy literature. Here I cite only the central texts and two critical pieces: Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), esp. chap. 8; Simone Chambers, “Discourse and Democratic Practices,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. Stephen K. White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 233–62; Axel Honneth, “The Other of Justice: Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism,” in *Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, 289–324; and Melissa Williams, *Voice, Trust, and Memory: Marginalized Groups and the Failings of Liberal Representation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

Ellison's novel, the form of democratic action taken by the invisible is somehow exemplary of democratic reciprocity but highlights, too, how practices of reciprocity have gone badly awry. In the Battle Royal episode Ellison is, as it were, turning an x-ray on ordinary human interaction in order to reveal the regularity of the skeletal structure supporting it; in this case, the structure links responsibility and equality, agreement and reciprocity. The regularity of structure beneath the seeming idiosyncrasy of our daily interactions thus has deeply political implications.<sup>23</sup>

Eventually I.M. becomes increasingly aware that his willingness to put aside his personal desire for respect, recognition, and social equality in order to gain access to the democracy's institutions of power—the schools and colleges that pave the way to positions of leadership, the public fora where the audience consists of those who make political decisions—has been abused precisely by not being recognized for what it is. It is, first of all, a gift that is more than a gift, for it involves an assumption of loss. It is also, and more importantly, an act and not merely, like humility, an aspect of character. The action that he recognizes, but that no one else can see, is sacrifice. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, this is “the destruction or surrender of something valued or desired for the sake of something having, or regarded as having, a higher or more pressing claim” or “the loss entailed by devotion to some other interest.” Sacrifice is, of course, one of Ellison's central terms in the novel and in his essays, and his focus on it excavates a central democratic fact. Although democracies claim to act for the good of all, every political decision inflicts some loss on some members of the polity, even in cases where the whole community generally benefits. Since democracy claims to secure the good of all citizens, it is people who benefit less than others from particular political decisions, but nonetheless accede to those decisions, who preserve the stability of political institutions. Their sacrifice makes collective democratic action possible. By presenting I.M.'s experience in terms of political categories like sacrifice, agreement, and responsibility, Ellison lays bare how politics structures ordinary life and ordinary psychic experience. “It is our fate as human beings always to give up some good things for other good things, to throw off certain bad circumstances only to create others.”<sup>24</sup>

Or if I were to use Ellison's terms to make that last point, it would go like this: by presenting I.M.'s experience in terms of political categories like sacrifice, agreement, and responsibility, Ellison names the rituals that give human life its meaning and that undergird our common actions. Indeed my metaphor of his writing

23 The everyday requires sacrifice.

24 “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” 208. Almost everyone with whom I have discussed these materials has objected that the term *sacrifice* does not properly belong to politics and is too dangerous to introduce to political discussion. And yet despite general disavowals of the topic, the word comes up frequently in political theory and political discussions. In fact, from a quick and casual survey, it's a fair bet that the majority of works published in political theory use the term at some point.

as an x-ray machine that reveals the skeleton of democratic life makes the same point that Ellison usually uses the word *ritual* to make.

#### EXAMPLE 2: STRANGERS BUMPING INTO EACH OTHER IN THE DARK

A second example of how Ellison moves from descriptions of small interactions to political analysis should help us refine our understanding of how broadly Ellison defines the rituals that reflect our common political life.

The novel begins with a rumination on responsibility as a democratic gift that presumes reciprocation. That rumination is inspired by nothing more than strangers bumping into each other in the dark. Ellison gives I.M. a prologue in which to explain why he is narrating his life history, and this prologue turns around I.M.'s account of how, being bumped in the dark by a stranger and called a name, he attacked the man and beat him within an inch of his life. Pondering whether this was an abdication of his social responsibilities, he reflects: "I can hear you say, 'What a horrible, irresponsible bastard!' And you're right. I leap to agree with you. . . . But to whom can I be responsible and why should I be when you refuse to see me? . . . Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement" (14). Ellison equips I.M. with the language of a political theorist—agreement, responsibility, recognition—as his protagonist epigrammatically relates his conclusions about democracy. He is willing to act responsibly by heeling to the limits of law and social custom, provided that his acts of responsibility are recognized as such: that is, as a gift other citizens have requested for their own good and for which they agree to give him a gift in exchange. His invisibility itself results from the failure of his proffer of reciprocity to be taken up—seen as citizenly action—by those around him. Again, Ellison puts pressure on small interactions until they yield conclusions about the political consequences of ordinary exchanges.

Regarding the man who bumped him in the dark, I.M. finally decides: "I was the irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society. . . . All dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all. But I shirked that responsibility" (14).<sup>25</sup> As I.M. sees it, his real irresponsibility lies in his failure to put an end to the abdication of responsibility perpetrated by the sleepwalkers. In their refusal to see the presence of the gift at the heart of democratic responsibility, they reduce

25 One should note in this passage how Ellison begins with clichéd notions of responsibility (two opposed clichés) and then moves from these to a completely counterintuitive version of the term ("I was the irresponsible one for I should have used my knife"). This strategy of beginning with what is familiar in order to take the reader to something else is central to Ellison's writing. Thus in "On Initiation Rites and Power," he writes, "I could not violate the reader's sense of reality, his sense of the way things were done, at least on the surface. My task would be to give him the surface and then try to take him into the internalities, take him below the level of racial structuring and down into those areas where we are simply men and women, human beings living on this blue orb, and not always living so well" (532). Cf. "Little Man at Chehaw Station," 496.

the possible sphere of democratic action. When the young I.M.'s drunk audience forces him to retract the phrase "social equality" and affirm "responsibility" without the promise of equality, they too erase the agreement beneath democratic institutions. Bumping into strangers in the dark is a metaphor for democratic citizenship. All our ordinary interactions with strangers are structured by rituals that define the life forms open to us within our democracies.

Importantly, Ellison's concern to reveal the rituals that constitute democratic citizenship is the source of the tight narrative tie among the book's many episodes.<sup>26</sup> The Battle Royal, the scene when I.M. bumps into a man in the dark and nearly kills him, and others, too, that are discussed in terms of agreement and responsibility all enact the same sort of ritual, whereby a citizen confronts, albeit in its most extreme version, the democratic fact of the powerlessness that dwells within any citizen's sovereignty. Moreover, the citizen confronts this democratic powerlessness amid a crush of strangers all also groping blindly in the dark. The problem with American life, in Ellison's view, is that insufficient creative energy has been directed to the problem of how to draw strangers into satisfactory relations of reciprocity with one another.<sup>27</sup> In an interview with Robert Penn Warren, he lamented life in the South in the following terms: "At certain moments a reality which is political and social and ideological asserts itself, and the human relationship breaks up and both groups of people fall into their abstract roles. Thus a great loss of human energy goes into maintaining our stylized identities. In fact, much of the energy of the imagination—much of the *psychic* energy of the South, among both whites and blacks, has gone, I think, into this particular negative art form."<sup>28</sup> Ellison sought to discern precisely how democracy stylizes the identities of individuals and loads citizens up with psychic tasks. He seeks rituals in our interactions not only in order to explain how communities are made into integral wholes and to explain the ideas used to do that work, but also in order to show what the stakes of communal life are for the individual psyche. And as a literary artist able to rework rituals, Ellison saw himself as having the chance to intervene in the stylization of identities and thereby to reform politics.

#### EXAMPLE 3: RIOTS AND THE CENTRAL DEMOCRATIC FACT OF SACRIFICE

My third example of how a small interaction is brought to be revealing of the larger political scene also reveals the degree to which Ellison's method of looking for the action patterns that link individual and political experience guided

26 The work with rituals is also the source of the book's formal unity.

27 We might take I.M.'s reflections on his funeral oration for Tod Clifton as focusing on this problem. The strangers there share something like Brotherhood, "something for which the theory of Brotherhood had given me no name" (453).

28 Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965) 344; emphasis in original.



the growth of the story itself. The epiphanic climax of the novel comes at the end of the riot, after I.M. has fallen into the coal chute, when he has that wild, wild dream of castration. He says:

I lay beside a river of black water, near where an armored bridge arched sharply away to where I could not see. And I was protesting their holding me and they were demanding that I return to them and were annoyed with my refusal. . . .

But now they came forward with a knife, holding me; and I felt the bright red pain and they took the two bloody blobs and cast them over the bridge, and out of my anguish I saw them curve up and catch beneath the apex of the curving arch of the bridge, to hang there, dripping down through the sunlight into the dark red water. And while the others laughed, before my pain-sharpened eyes the whole world was slowly turning red. (569)

This epiphany turns on a pun, and to catch it out will require a small digression back to the subject of sacrifice again.<sup>29</sup>

I.M.'s most rigorous analysis of the idea of sacrifice, and its role in politics, occurs in his conversation with Hambro after the Brotherhood has switched its policy and attention away from Harlem. I.M. is neither included in policy deliberations nor even forewarned of the change and confronts his Brotherhood tutor, Hambro, who admits: "It's unfortunate, Brother, but your members will have to be sacrificed" (501). Here Ellison at last brings I.M. face to face with what has, throughout the novel, kept him running and accepting loss in pursuit of some elusive gain: the repeated requirement that he sacrifice. "Sacrifice?" I.M. says, "You say that very easily."

Eventually the conversation with Hambro about sacrifice results in I.M.'s discovery of three criteria for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate sacrifices. Beginning a dialogue between them, Hambro answers:

"The interests of one group of brothers must be sacrificed to that of the whole."

"Why wasn't I told of this?" I said.

"You will be in time, by the committee—Sacrifice is necessary now—"

"But shouldn't sacrifice be made willingly by those who know what they're doing? My people don't understand why they're being sacrificed. They don't even *know* they're being sacrificed—at least not by us." (502)

In I.M.'s resistance to Hambro, criteria for distinguishing illegitimate from legitimate sacrifice and for rejecting unreasonable sacrifices emerge. First and

29 Alan Nadel discusses Ellison's interest in puns and acknowledges their psychological force: "they reveal connections that have to be repressed so as to expedite the 'normal' flow of information." "Ralph Ellison and the American Canon," *American Literary History* 13, no. 2 (2001): 394; cf. 395, 397ff.

foremost, there are problems of agency. The grammatical distinction between Hambro's use of the passive voice—"your members will have to be sacrificed"—and I.M.'s reference to the *making* of sacrifices by choice and with foreknowledge accurately registers the conflict here. Scapegoats are sacrificed; a hero sacrifices and, for her sacrifice, gains the honor that accrues from having other citizens acknowledge that she, and not they, has borne the worst of it. The idea of "gift" does not have a semantic range wide enough to capture the "losses" involved in democratic politics, and so it is inadequate to the task of "honoring" those who give the gift of absorbing loss. Here already are two of the three criteria for distinguishing legitimate sacrifices. First, a legitimate sacrifice is made voluntarily and knowingly; second, democratic responsibility stems from the agreement to honor the voluntary sacrifice, which is more than a gift.

Hambro refuses to acknowledge the importance of these criteria and continues the argument thus:

"All of us must sacrifice for the good of the whole. Change is achieved through sacrifice. We follow the laws of reality, so we make sacrifices."

"But the community is demanding equality of sacrifice," I said. "We've never asked for special treatment."

"... It's inevitable that some must make greater sacrifices than others..."

"That 'some' being my people..."

"In this instance, yes."

"So the weak must sacrifice for the strong. Is that it, Brother?"

"No, a part of the whole is sacrificed—and will continue to be until a new society is formed." (502–3)

Hambro hopes sacrifice will produce a new and internally consistent society. He, in other words, is engaged in the ritual driving out of a scapegoat, or a ritual of purification.<sup>30</sup> In response, I.M. asks whether it is possible to keep those who sacrifice within the community so that society becomes different but not new. A discourse of sacrifice can function only within the context of a fallibilistic approach to politics, where it is not the perfect resolution of the problem of coercion that is sought, but only a just resolution. Losses do not disappear but must be acknowledged to be part of the fabric of society.

I.M. articulates one last criterion for determining the legitimacy of particular sacrifices: sacrifice becomes illegitimate when one person or group regularly sacrifices for the rest. Instead sacrifices must be reciprocated. The weak have been incorporated into the democratic polity only when they are in an equal position

30 These analytical terms are not far from those Ellison himself uses to describe the political behaviors of whites who want to "get shut" of blacks and Garveyites. "Both would use the black man as a scapegoat to achieve a national catharsis, and both would by way of curing the patient, destroy him." "What America Would Be Like without Blacks," 579.

to request sacrifice from others; “equality of sacrifice” is the third criterion of legitimacy. I.M. learns that Hambro is merely cynical when the latter remarks: “I thought that you had learned . . . [that] it’s impossible *not* to take advantage of the people. . . . The trick is to take advantage of them in their own best interest” (504). I.M. realizes that Hambro “didn’t have to deal with being both sacrificer and victim; . . . he didn’t have to put the knife blade to his own throat” (506). In Hambro’s world, those who sacrifice are victims, or scapegoats, because someone else controls the sacrifice. The Brotherhood’s policies undo the democratic promise that one can choose one’s own sacrifices, and thus their policies also undermine the limits on sacrifice and the distinction between sacrifice and scapegoating established by the need for consent. The Brotherhood’s policies separate the agency of sacrifice from the experience of it. Democracy, however, opens a distinction between those who give up their interests consensually and those who do not, between sacrificers and victims, aiming to reduce as much as possible the category of victim. Moreover, a democratic sacrifice opens a covenant—it is not mere sufferance of someone else’s abuses—so that those who benefit from the sacrifice must see themselves as recipients of gifts in respect to which they must act responsibly. It is in constantly reopening democratic covenants, and in requiring the cultivation of trust to do so, that the practice of mutual sacrifice does most of its political work. If democracies are to distribute political losses as justly as possible, their citizens must work to see that sacrifices are voluntary, honored, and reciprocated.

I.M.’s account of his invisibility is integrally bound up with the failure of the political world in the novel to take proper stock of different citizens’ sacrifices. At the end of the conversation with Hambro, I.M. shouts:

Look at me! Look at me! Everywhere I’ve turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good—only *they* were the ones who benefited. And now we start on the old sacrificial merry-go-round. At what point do we stop? Is this the true definition, is Brotherhood a matter of sacrificing the weak? If so, at what point do we stop? (501)

No account of democratic sacrifice that fails to acknowledge that communal decisions inevitably provide private benefit to some members of the community at the expense of others can provide a realistic or legitimate basis for collective action. I.M.’s attempt to get Hambro to see him—“Look at me! Look at me!”—reveals the point of his critique of Hambro’s failure to consider who benefits from democratic agreements. I.M. is underscoring the fact that when the recipients of the gift of sacrifice fail to acknowledge the gifts they receive, they render invisible, or cease to see, those who sacrifice. Hambro, looking *through* I.M., sees only the transparent agreement achieved by the party’s “committee.” I.M.’s original, metanarrative plan to show his readers what they are “looking through” (581) when they do not see him now becomes his central project within the narrative, too.

Agreements never look transparent if we see that they require some citizens to accept less fulfillment of their interests than do others.

If democratic citizens are going to address the problem of sacrifice adequately, they must ask three questions: Who is sacrificing for whom? Is the sacrifice voluntary and honored? Will the sacrifice be reciprocated? I.M. does not deny that political practice entails sacrifice and disappointment, but he discerns that “sacrifice” cannot be said easily: it is a political action that should be accompanied by the democratic concern fostered by these three questions. Indeed the politics of democratic agreement, in order to advance legitimacy, must be able to develop such a democratic concern for loss.

But I began this discussion about sacrifice in order to find the pun that motivates the castration dream. Where, oh where, has that little pun gone? With all this analysis I’ve now buried it, so let me repeat it. When I.M. complains about the Brotherhood policy change, Hambro says, “It’s unfortunate, Brother, but your *members* will have to be sacrificed” (501, emphasis added).<sup>31</sup> There it is, the source of the castration dream, a “linked verbal echo,” to use Ellison’s words, that appears approximately sixty pages before the surreal grand finale of the dream. “Ellison’s transitions, puns, images, and allusions create a ghost network of language and craft that integrate the sundry aspects of the American [Dream/]Nightmare.”<sup>32</sup>

By positioning the dream as the last word on the riot scene, and also the last word in I.M.’s conversation with Hambro, Ellison explicitly links what he has discovered about sacrifice through I.M.’s personal interactions, including his conversation with Hambro, to large-scale political events. The reader gets to see the same ritual of sacrifice enacted on both personal and political levels. It’s as if the riot tells us how existentially and politically bracing are ordinary citizens’ everyday experiences of loss and sacrifice; the riot, oddly enough, becomes a metaphor for an ordinary part of democratic life. Indeed if we assimilate it to the dream and consider the dreamy riot and dream sequence to originate in I.M.’s earlier personal experiences of sacrifice, the end of the novel makes a powerful statement about the psychic pressures of democratic life, where citizens are by definition empowered only to be disempowered.<sup>33</sup> The dream scene also confirms that the demo-

31 Ellison follows the same analytical moves of this passage of the novel in his essay “What America Would Be Like without Blacks.” Thus, just before the passage cited above, he remarks that the early eighteenth-century attempt to export all blacks back to Africa “would have amounted to the severing of a healthy and indispensable member” (579). He was aware of the pun.

32 Nadel, “Ellison and the American Canon,” 400.

33 This line of analysis is consistent with Nadel, who writes: “In this context, it becomes imperative to regard the term American Dream as a pun that pervasively informs Ellison’s fiction. The term signifies both America’s conscious ideals and the deluded unconsciousness with which it evades and undermines them. These two forms of the American Dream intersect in that demi-monde of the collective and individual psyche, the marginal space where the visionary is sightless and dream verges on nightmare, the surreal meeting place of the symbolic and the grotesque.” Nadel, “Ellison and the American Canon,” 397.

cratic ritual in which Ellison has been most interested, sacrifice, turns out, in the novel and in I.M.'s experience, to be, inevitably, castration. The world inhabited by I.M. has failed to find a sufficiently democratic response to the necessary fact of loss and sacrifice in democratic politics and instead simply unmans citizens. First asking for their consent, it then does what it will with them.

### The Accuracy of Ellison's X-Ray Vision

Ellison's intuition that sacrifice is central to the meaning of democratic citizenship was absolutely accurate.<sup>34</sup> In fact, he zeroed in on a central but generally ignored term in the social contract tradition. The Enlightenment philosophers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau all draw on the same Old Testament story about Jephthah (Judges 11) in order to ground their accounts of consent and political obligation. Jephthah, who had been cast out of the Israelite tribe as a bastard, gains his place both in the tribe and also as the leader of the Israelites by fighting for them and winning. He wins when he vows to God that if given the victory, he will sacrifice the first thing he sees when he gets home. His daughter, of course, comes out to greet him, and when he is torn about what to do—whether he should carry out the sacrifice he has promised to Yahweh—she tells him that since he promised the Lord to sacrifice, he must do so. She will go with her friends to the hills for two months to lament her virgin death, and then she will let her father sacrifice her. Jephthah gains his citizenship through military sacrifice; he cements a system of promise and consent on the basis of his daughter's self-sacrifice. For Hobbes, Jephthah's promise to God is paradigmatic of the promises that underlie consent-based politics, but the daughter's self-sacrifice is the basic model for the relationship between citizen and sovereign (*Leviathan* 21.7). Beneath the promise and consent that found the social contract is the most extreme loss. Ellison's novel thus unearths, through astute observation of practice, the principle buried beneath the operations of a consent-based politics.<sup>35</sup>

In sum, then, Ellison's pursuit of the rituals inherent in ordinary life led him to the following "tragi-comic" discovery about democratic politics. A legitimate account of collective democratic action must begin by acknowledging this "paradox of politics": that communal decisions inevitably benefit some members of a community at the expense of others, even in cases where the whole community generally benefits.<sup>36</sup> Since democracy claims to secure the good of all citizens,

34 We can tell that Ellison meant his term *sacrifice* to be used for political and not only psychological analysis because he makes it the centerpiece of a criticism of Hannah Arendt's arguments about school desegregation and Little Rock. Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 343–44.

35 Ellison discussed the founding of the US in precisely such terms (see n10). He also regularly invoked the idea that the Constitution was founded on the blood sacrifice of the Revolutionary War. See, for instance, "On Initiation Rites and Power."

36 William Connolly has recently called this the "paradox of politics": "Every form of social completion and enablement also contains subjugations and cruelties within it. Politics, then,

it is the people who benefit less than others from particular political decisions, but nonetheless accede, who preserve political stability. Their sacrifice makes collective democratic action possible. Toward the end of the castration dream, I.M. dreams of saying to Jack and Bledsoe and old Emerson and Norton and Ras: "But if you'll look, you'll see . . . It's not invisible . . . There hang not only my generations wasting upon the water . . . But your sun . . . And your moon . . . Your world . . . There's your universe, and that drip-drop upon the water you hear is all the history you've made, all you're going to make. Now laugh, you scientists. Let's hear you laugh!" (570). The blood that drains from him constitutes the world of his tormentors and their only legacy. So too the sacrifices of some citizens are the bedrock of other citizens' lives. Ellison challenges us to look at our comforts and see the sacrifices of others that have made them possible.

Once the sacrifices of our political life become visible, democracy must be seen not as a static end state that achieves the common good by assuring the same benefits or the same level of benefits to everyone, but rather as a political practice by which the diverse negative effects of collective political action, and even of just decisions, can be distributed equally, and constantly redistributed over time, on the basis of consensual interactions.<sup>37</sup> The viability of democratic citizenship depends on how well a democratic polity deals with the necessary presence of loss in politics. Indeed the problem of loss highlights the fundamental paradox of democratic citizenship: democratic citizens are encouraged to think of themselves as all-powerful even in the very moments that power is being taken from them. Democratic citizens therefore regularly need to recover the agency that is supposed to be their birthright in the face of its degradation. Citizenship consists partly of rituals used to manage the psychological tension that arises from the experience of being a powerless sovereign, and some future democracy may, Ellison is hopeful, one day find healthy rituals with which to do this. The democracy in which I.M. lives, however, has adopted castration as its solution. Through that

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is the medium through which these ambiguities can be engaged and confronted, shifted and stretched." *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 94.

37 Here is a section of the interview with Robert Penn Warren in which Ellison criticizes Arendt for not understanding the place of sacrifice in politics:

WARREN: Here in the midst of what has been an expanding economy you have a contracting economy for the unprepared, for the Negro.

ELLISON: That's the paradox. And this particularly explains something new which has come into the picture; that is, a determination by the Negro no longer to be the scapegoat, no longer to pay, to be sacrificed to—the inadequacies of other Americans. We want to socialize the cost. A cost has been exacted in terms of character, in terms of courage, and determination, and in terms of self-knowledge and self-discovery. Worse, it has led to social, economic, political, and intellectual disadvantages and to a contempt even for our lives. And one motive for our rejection of the old traditional role of national scapegoat is an intensified awareness that not only are we being destroyed by the sacrifice, but that the nation has been rotting at its moral core. (339)

ritual, some citizens are made to bear the marks of the impotence with which all the rest are also afflicted. They become apotropaic offscourings in an extreme ritual of purification.

### The Tragicomedy of Citizenship

American representative democracy, Ellison suggests in *Invisible Man*, has long been running along a road of failure, along the inseparable tracks of tragedy and comedy, leaving citizens to feel, like I.M., “as though [they’d] been watching a bad comedy.” I.M. continues: “Only it was real and I was living it and it was the only historically meaningful life that I could live. If I left it, I’d be nowhere. As dead and as meaningless as Clifton” (478). I have used the term “tragi-comic” to describe Ellison’s discovery of the place of sacrifice in democratic politics because it is his own term for describing a suitably democratic political vision. He talks about the relationship between tragedy and comedy frequently,<sup>38</sup> but let me quote just one remark from a foreword Ellison wrote for someone else’s novel. John Kouwenhoven’s *The Beer Can by the Highway*, Ellison wrote, “has been quietly teaching Americans to discern in things both great and small, dignified and pedestrian, that which is essentially ‘American’ about American civilization. It . . . was written by a critic who has looked long and hard at American culture with that native mixture of comic and tragic vision which is so necessary if we are to make sense of our diverse, pluralistic society.”<sup>39</sup> In *Invisible Man* the juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy comes out perhaps most clearly in the riot scene. Face to face with burning Harlem, I.M. reflects: “I wanted to laugh, for suddenly I realized that I didn’t know whether I had been part of a sellout or not” (480). But unlike I.M., the rioters “were in no mood for laughter.” Tragedy and comedy arise from the same situation, but they differ depending on whether the situation is experienced with or without understanding of it by those who participate in it. Moreover, to view any particular event as tragic or comic is to learn to accept it by one of two different strategies.<sup>40</sup>

Reflecting on invisibility, Ellison says: “Men in our situation simply cannot afford to ignore the nuances of human relationships. And although action is necessary, forthright action, it must be guided—tempered by insight and compassion. Nevertheless, isn’t this what civilization is all about? And isn’t this what tragedy

38 E.g., “Address to the Harvard College Alumni, Class of 1949” (1974), “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure” (1961), and “Working Notes for *Invisible Man*” (1945), in *Collected Essays*, 415–26, 63–80, and 341–45, respectively.

39 Foreword to *The Beer Can on the Highway* (1988), in *Collected Essays*, 847.

40 On the tragic and comic in Ellison, and as “two aspects of the individualist ethics that connect Emerson to Ellison and Burke,” see Albrecht, “Saying Yes and Saying No,” esp. 50–52. See also Houston Baker, “To Move without Moving: An Analysis of Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison’s Trueblood Episode,” *PMLA* 98, no. 5 (1983): 828–45.

has always sought to teach us?"<sup>41</sup> Tragedy teaches one not to take advantage of the necessary suffering of others but to see and acknowledge it.

We are perhaps less familiar, however, with what comedy has to offer politics. Ellison describes his coming-to-know his protagonist's voice thus:

But then as I listened to its *taunting laughter* and speculated as to what kind of individual would speak in such accents, I decided that it would be one who had been forged in the underground of American experience *and yet managed to emerge less angry than ironic. That he would be a blues-toned laughter-at-wounds who included himself in his indictment of the human condition.* I liked the idea, and as I tried to visualize the speaker I came to relate him to those ongoing conflicts, tragic and comic, that had claimed my group's energies since the abandonment of the Reconstruction. (*Invisible Man*, preface, xviii; emphasis added)

In the face of one's own necessary suffering, comedy teaches a citizen to laugh. As far as Ellison is concerned, laughter and irony, and not merely forgiveness, enable citizens to satisfactorily assimilate the political imposition of losses and sacrifices.<sup>42</sup> Forgiveness fails to involve those who have *not* suffered from a communal decision in that suffering—they remain objects of others' attention but do not themselves participate in any way in the event of the suffering. But laughter does draw even those who have not suffered into awareness and experience of the loss.<sup>43</sup> Those who *have* suffered do not pursue revenge but make sure those who *have not* suffered are aware of their beneficence. A comic ethics provides a mandate for rhetoric: namely, for confronting our differences and communicating across them. This ethics encourages 'charitability' toward the motives of others; indeed, the alternative is an assumption of universal cunning and hypocrisy that would make social cooperation impossible."<sup>44</sup> Here one suspects that Ellison follows Kenneth Burke, who interpreted the physiology of laughter as indicating an evolution from the gesture of the threat—open mouth, bared teeth, guttural sounds—to the gesture asking for cooperation and, even, love.<sup>45</sup> In coming to hear I.M.'s voice, Ellison hears "taunting laughter," which suggests a similar sort of evolution.

Pure anger may be a motivation to speak, but it cannot determine the form that

41 Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 343.

42 Cf. "On Being the Target of Discrimination" (1989), where he writes: "Segregation is far more than a negative social condition; it is also a perspective that fosters an endless exercise of irony, and often inspires a redeeming laughter." *Collected Essays*, 821.

43 On Arendt on the subject of irreversibility and forgiveness, see Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 76–79, 84–87. On irreversibility in Ellison, see Eddy, *Rites of Identity*, 97, 127–28.

44 Albrecht, "Saying Yes and Saying No," 53.

45 Eddy, *Rites of Identity*, 144–53.



rhetoric takes if speech is to undo invisibility and facilitate democratic representation. In *Invisible Man* Harlem has its one fury, Ras, a Caribbean-born political activist who preaches revenge on his street corner: he shouts, "Blood calls for blood! You remember that" (376). I.M. rejects Ras's "shrill," anger-driven rhetoric almost immediately upon arriving in Harlem. Seconds after he notices him, he is surprised to observe two police officers standing mere feet away, chatting and laughing with each other, and ignoring Ras (159–60). He realizes that anger can rarely make people visible to one another, for it derives from specificity of experience and particularized views of how the world should be.<sup>46</sup> In search of visibility, public language, the language we use for talking to strangers, must generate a transition away from the anger (or other particular interest) that drives someone to speak and to a language that can integrate standpoints. Laughter, in contrast to anger, arises from a shared recognition that aligns different standpoints, even if only temporarily.<sup>47</sup> "The elements of identity shared between sacrificer, victim, and audience can emerge into consciousness when the clown or the fool of comedy can laugh along with everyone else—all laugh at, and thereby sacrifice, requisite bits of their self."<sup>48</sup> Laughter must somehow issue from anger and transform it; comedy teaches the forms of imagination that allow a metamorphosis in one's assessment of one's interests.

To see the paradox of democratic citizenship—that it empowers only to disempower—and to weep teaches sympathy for one's fellow citizens; to see this paradox and to laugh is to make another democratic sacrifice, enabling further political action. Here, then, are two possible strategies for dealing with the fact of loss in politics. Tragicomic citizenship blends them. Finally, a tragicomic citizen has this to say about democratic politics: "Oh, what a joke on us it is, that our democratic ideals are so noble, and raise our desires to such a pitch, and are also so far beyond our grasp. Let's hope the joke is good enough to keep us at it."

<sup>46</sup> Danielle S. Allen, *World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), chap. 7. See also John Braithwaite, "Survey Article: Repentance Rituals and Restorative Justice," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2000): 115–31.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Breton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911).

<sup>48</sup> Eddy, *Rites of Identity*, 88.

## 21: James Baldwin

### Democracy between Nihilism and Hope

John E. Drabinski

*The story of the Negro in America is the story of America—or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans. It is not a very pretty story.*

James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone”

Where does James Baldwin belong? And to what world does he speak?

One of the quirky features of Baldwin’s intellectual legacy is our tendency to render his thought in quips and soundbites. There is, it seems, a Baldwin quote for every moment. His charmingly photogenic face, his ability to pose in writerly contemplation, is mimicked by his writing in its ability to address our condition with sharp, captivating, and important words—whether spoken to his own time or to ours, living as we do in the horizon of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and all that has followed. This is one of Baldwin’s great gifts as a writer, to have spoken so widely to the human condition, whether in the mundane terms of our everyday existence or to our oldest and most troubling political dilemmas. Writerly ambition will do that.

What was Baldwin’s ambition? To what did he want to speak? And toward what did he want to draw us? Baldwin understood himself from the beginning to be a witness—a witness to history, to race, to memory, to the astonishing beauty of black life, to the unspeakable passages that happened alongside that life and made it possible, to survival, to thriving in and outside the margins, and ultimately to the enduring, everyday possibilities of the imagination. His style as a writer lends itself to both the sharp, simple insight and the profound and the searching that comes from a few well-chosen words. We could say, then, that in the midtwentieth century Baldwin was already very twenty-first century: memeable, ready for easy citation, a source for shorthand on wide, deep thinking about race and racism.

This analytical shorthand, as it were, is a kind of *pharmakon*: simultaneously cure and poison. It is the cure for our loss of words in the face of racial atrocity. Baldwin’s witness is honest and plain; there is no concealing the rage or sorrow in his work, and his ability to supply us with expression in times of despair is no small contribution to living under racialized, violent social and political regimes. Finding words for atrocity and pain is already a part of complaint, accusation, and redress. We *need* Baldwin in moments of crisis. That must be said. But for those

of us with an interest in and taste for systematic accounts of thinking, this captivating rhetorical shorthand is also a bit of a poison. There is a Baldwin quote for every moment: the moment of rage, the moment of contemplation, the moment of pleasure, the moment of resistance, the moment of nihilism, and of course the moment of hope. Yet seen in a broader context of Baldwinian thinking, every moment is registered within a wider, more complex articulation of self, community, and world. What is Baldwin *the thinker* in these moments? How can we assemble a story about Baldwin the theorist, about his constellation of critical concepts, that exceeds the anecdote and epigraph and points to a wider vision of being, knowing, and acting? Who is Baldwin as social, cultural, and political *theorist*?

The reflections that follow circle around the question of American democracy and democratic thinking in Baldwin's nonfiction. In particular, I am interested in how senses of the democratic—social and cultural as well as political—emerge inside Baldwin's thinking both as an explicit theme and as an implicit lifelong engagement with questions of belonging, rights to place, and imaginations of the future. These questions are urgent and necessary. But there is also something quite cruel about this question and the problematics that cluster to it. Baldwin's meditation on the meaning of blackness in an antiblack world—arguably the unifying thread across his life's work, fiction and nonfiction—explores the terms of Americanness and democratic thinking (or thinking the democratic), to be sure, but always with a terrifying sense of irony and doubled doublespeak that critically dismantles the terms *America* and *democracy* at the very same moment he writes them in the affirmative.<sup>1</sup> Indeed that is one of the key claims in what follows. It is nevertheless worth noting the cruelty of the question itself, and to pause and consider the stakes of folding Baldwin into ideas of America, democracy, and American democracy. These are ideas, as well as material practices, that never wanted him, as a black person, to be any part of any of it *from the beginning*, while at the same time remaining the conditions of so many appeals and rhetoric of liberation constitutive of the African-American political tradition. That is, these ideas, in the African American context, are pharmacological. Baldwin's intervention in these questions is nuanced and complex. As part of that nuance and complexity, any reckoning with Baldwin and democracy must contend with the subtleties of his articulation, attend to the tension his *positive* position holds in relation to the irreducibility of nihilistic race realism, and therefore situate the

1 Lawrie Balfour's now-classic *Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000) explores this painful intersection of antiblackness and questions of democracy in detail, with particular attention to the challenge of Baldwin's eschewing all notions of racial innocence. This challenge is drawn out by Balfour in the interest of critiquing empty notions of rights, freedom, and equality. While the reflections that follow begin in largely the same place, I am here interested more in the cultural formation of lives of not just resistance and critique but sustenance, meaning making, and thriving as a community dedicated to the production and reproduction of self-knowledge outside the white gaze.

democratic in a wider conceptual field concerned with time, memory, and history. *Democracy between nihilism and hope*. This is in the end a question of the systematicity of Baldwin's thought and the place of the democratic within that system. With that in view as a sort of ethical and epistemological map to writing and thinking about Baldwin, a sense of the moral and conceptual stakes in asking Baldwin back into the question of the democratic, my reflections are here concerned with the layers of thinking in his own texts and how those texts display a systematic approach to questions of belonging, time, and politics.

### Placing Baldwin

Let us consider two key moments in Baldwin's work, both of which articulate the paradox of African American life: belonging in a world that is antiblack. Or, put in a word, the question of *place*. Where does Baldwin in particular, and so for him African Americans generally, *belong*? In what place?

The first key moment is a moving passage from the essay "Princes and Powers," written for *Encounter* in sustained reflection on the 1956 Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris. The 1956 congress was an enormously important event in the history of ideas in the black Atlantic. Dedicated to the question of diasporic unity, exploring how notions of blackness *might* or *could* be rooted in a common place (geographic and imaginary), the congress turns again and again to the centerpiece of the Négritude movement: Africa as idea, ideal, and spiritual center. Aimé Césaire, who along with Léopold Senghor represented the poetic and political program called Négritude, articulated a key distinction between "culture" and "civilization" that would sustain the language of diasporic diversity *and* unity at the same time. Culture, Césaire argues, is a site of difference; Négritude ought not be understood as an argument for cultural uniformity. Diaspora's thread is not a cultural sameness but instead a family resemblance, a shared sense of animating spirit Césaire calls *civilization*. "It is immediately apparent," Césaire writes, "that national cultures, as particular as they are, are grouped by affinities. And these great cultural relationships, these great cultural families, have a name: they are *civilizations*." Further, Césaire clarifies that "one can speak of a great family of African cultures . . . which includes the different cultures of each of the countries of Africa. And we know that the misadventures of history have caused the field of this civilization, the area of this civilization, to exceed today Africa itself."<sup>2</sup> This is a revolutionary argument. It argues that African civilization *already* stands on the world stage with other global civilizations. Césaire repudiates the underdevelopment or deficiency model of thinking blackness on the continent and in the Atlantic world. This is precisely the sort of position with which Baldwin has deepest

2 Aimé Césaire, "Culture and Colonization," trans. Brent Edwards, *Social Text* 103 18, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 127.

sympathies. Césaire's argument also calls for a renewal or revitalization of black cultures globally through the deliberate, poetic invocation of this animating spirit. Négritude is a project of revitalization rather than pure creation or correction, infusing black arts with a grounding spirit and furthering liberation struggle. Liberation from antiblackness is intimately related to cultural pride, which, for Césaire and Négritude, is more than just affect. It is total transformation of personal and national character through a reconnection of past with future, redeeming the present and its colonial abjection. Revitalization *and* making new worlds possible. The 1956 congress told a long story about affirming blackness in the horizon of its original possibilities. Civilization, fecundity, culture.

Now, in a certain sense, this is precisely Baldwin's project: affirmation of blackness that distinguishes the black experience from experiences of white racism, and the subsequent thinking through of blackness outside of forms of cultural and psychological abjection. Indeed, as we will see in more detail below, Baldwin's exploration of vernacular culture and its interstitial formation retrieves, then cultivates, a sense of identity outside the reach of white racism and its subjugating gaze. The formation of African American "national culture," to put it in Césaire's terms, is a foundational piece of Baldwin's thinking. At the same time, and this is the decisive issue in "Princes and Powers," Césaire's metaphysical overreach is rooted in a problematic assessment of black life in the Americas. The diasporic question raised at the 1956 congress presumed a key claim: that Africans in the Americas were lost, abandoned, and lacking a sense of place. Négritude re-places Africans in the Americas back in Africa as a civilizational force, producing both diasporic identity and cultural difference. But this is where Baldwin hesitates. Is this claim of loss and abandonment *true*? Does it describe the historical experience of African Americans in particular? The simple, critical claim here is that, for Baldwin, African Americans are already *at home*. Blackness is not a synonym for permanent exile. He writes in "Princes and Powers" that

the land of our forefathers' exile had been made, by that travail, our home. It may have been the popular impulse to keep us at the bottom of the perpetually shifting and bewildered populace; but we were, on the other hand, almost personally indispensable to each and every one of them, simply because, without us, they could never have been certain, in such a confusion, where the bottom was; and nothing, in any case, could take away our title to the land which we, too, had purchased with our blood.<sup>3</sup>

This is a key passage for understanding the complexity of Baldwin's conception of the very terms of democracy—in particular, political conceptions of "the people," of history, and of belonging. Baldwin here suspends us between multiple grounds

3 James Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," in *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's 1985), 44. Hereafter, all essays in this collection are referred to parenthetically in the text, by page number.

and sits with, rather than resolves, paradox. Assigned, of necessity, to the bottom. Yet holding title to the land. Suffering as the site, not condition, of belonging. Exilic consciousness proper, as displacement from an identity rooted in Africa, is the sole property of forefathers; their work makes home for those who follow. Through travail and bewilderment, the forefathers' suffering becomes *our* title and the blood of that suffering becomes *our* blood. Black life is indispensable but also shifting and bewildered at the level both of the structural and of *lived experience*, something we see, for example, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, in which so many characters, Gabriel the father-pastor in particular, embody the complex inheritances of enslavement and the racial caste system. Or in *Another Country*, where Baldwin documents Rufus Scott's downward spiral, then suicide, with a raw narrative of the failures of interracial crossings. Yet—and this is the crucial rewrite of the pure nihilism such inheritance might suggest—the occupants of “the bottom” have title to the land. Suffering—“our blood,” what becomes a wider sense in his and the work of others a *blues* aesthetic—purchases a sense of place. What is Négritude in this moment? That is precisely Baldwin's point: that Négritude founders on the grounds of American identity *itself*—in particular, and this is part of his complexity, the identity of black people in the Americas.

How do we make sense of these tense, nondialectical shifts, paradoxical and irreconcilable? Alienation is home, home is belonging, home is where you *cannot* fully belong. What sense could this make? It is for Baldwin, at bottom, a story of place. Of place without eternal exile. A story of African American belonging and home.

The second passage is part of a famous memory-piece from *The Fire Next Time*, written just over a half decade after “Princes and Powers” and deeply engaged with two key sites of belonging *inside* African-American life: the Nation of Islam and the church. The church as a question—*our* church, as Baldwin says in the opening paragraph of the main text, underscoring the question of belonging—initiates a long exploration of his father's legacy. The exploration revisits many of the themes found in Baldwin's early and perhaps most famous essay “Notes of a Native Son,” in particular how a fraught relationship with Christianity and its role as an African American institution reveals Baldwin to himself. In “Notes of a Native Son” Baldwin meditated on the meaning of his father's death and how that death represented the passing of a form of belonging and community in James's then still young life. The opening bits of *The Fire Next Time* repersonalize the church, telling young James's story, while at the same time describing how the church mimics and struggles against a new agent of belonging: the hustler. The church grasps at the same thing as the hustler, namely, possession of the person, of young black life. And therefore of the fate of black Harlem. “The ghetto” is saturated with hustle. Hustle is respect, also belonging. Alongside the church Baldwin places the Nation of Islam. No matter what Baldwin in the last word thinks of its hard-edged racial politics and mythic conception of the origin of black people, the Nation inserts an important, putatively new form of militancy and respectability into belonging

and community. Or at least it promises that. In a certain sense, the Nation represents the moment documented in *The Fire Next Time*, the broad political and cultural sensibility of the civil rights movement, more fully: attuned to revolutionary times, a path out of the nihilism of the hustler and his destructive presence in the ghetto. Also: liberated from the complications of the church as, in Baldwin's account, a kind of pathological community that is simultaneously sympathetic and outrageous. The church and the Nation, intervals between nihilism and hope.

But before *The Fire Next Time* moves on to the question of religion, secular struggle, and the future of interracial relations, Baldwin pauses in a moment of remembrance. His remembrance draws the church into hustle, marking both the character of the church as making community where there is none (the forefathers and their coping with exilic consciousness) and its descent into the predatory shadows of "the ghetto." All of this comes in a simple question put to a young James Baldwin by a pastor. The question is famous, and the context worth quoting in full. Baldwin writes:

My friend took me into the back room to meet his pastor—a woman. There she sat, in her robes, smiling, an extremely proud and handsome woman, with Africa, Europe, and the America of the American Indian blended in her face. She was perhaps forty-five or fifty at this time, and in our world she was a very celebrated woman. My friend was about to introduce me when she looked at me and smiled and said, "Whose little boy are you?" Now this, unbelievably, was precisely the phrase used by pimps and racketeers on the Avenue when they suggested, both humorously and intensely, that I "hang out" with them. Perhaps part of the terror they had caused me to feel came from the fact that I unquestionably wanted to be *somebody's* little boy. (343)

This is the question of the church and the question of the hustler, which becomes, too, the question of the Nation of Islam. It is not just the question in the sense of the question each iteration asks, but also, and perhaps most fundamentally, the condition for the possibility of their very being: both the hustler and the church move in a space of loss, of homelessness, and the response they give is the promise of belonging. To the hustle. To God's people. To one form of being special or another, in origin or salvation or swagger.

Baldwin's place is this swirl that does not reconcile but is instead the fragmentation of being and the reassembly, by chance and interpellation, of those fragments in the hustle. It is the condition of despair. But also something else.

### Harlem's Despair

Raoul Peck's compelling treatment of Baldwin's life and thought in the film *I Am Not Your Negro* occasioned both deep praise and skeptical criticism. The praise was largely directed toward Peck's capacity as a filmmaker to make Baldwin speak

not just in his own voice but in a voice as contemporary as it is historical. Criticism of the film was varied, with much of it asking about aspects of Baldwin's work left out of Peck's rendering or wondering about the absence of certain interlocutors and the inclusion of others. Why the despair over assassinated black men rather than the fecundity of life? What parts of Baldwin's life and thinking are lost with focus on death and national politics to the exclusion of local and community friendships on the margins of the writerly world?

Whatever the critical reception of Peck's film, *I Am Not Your Negro* leaves the viewer with a robust, at times disturbing sense of Baldwin's pessimism. It is a well-earned pessimism. Largely a reconstruction of Baldwin's unfinished work on Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., *I Am Not Your Negro* documents the affects of African American life in the frame of three terrifying assassinations. Each assassination is the death of a prophet and his hope, evoking Peck's early documentary and fiction film work on Patrice Lumumba. That is, Baldwin's pessimism, in Peck's hands, comes from the very real, indisputably cratering experience of the best and brightest of a generation gunned down for no reason other than race-hate. In those bodies, vacated of their own lives and vacated of the hopes of a people, there is only repetition of our nation's foundation: murderous antiblack racism. Nothing is new. This is American history, Peck tells us. Or, better: this is, Peck reminds us, the essence of what Baldwin has to tell us. *Tell us*. A reckoning with his past, Baldwin's past, is face to face with the broader story of racial murder and violence that preceded it. I am thinking here of repeated, resonant images of lynching from the turn of the century, followed by what succeeded it, the inheritance of lynching today, in the contemporary moment from which Peck writes and creates: extrajudicial killings of black Americans by the police. To bring the question of democracy to bear on Baldwin's work is cruel for this reason. Ours is the nation that has never wanted black people, even as it has needed the same people in order to know where the bottom was. This ontology of the nation, the very being or Being of our foundation, is generated by the folding of history documented in Baldwin's work, rendered by Peck, as the folding of violence across history.

Harlem is this folded history.

We see this vividly in the opening pages of *The Fire Next Time*. These pages document what Baldwin, in the prefatory "Letter to my Nephew," declares as a warning to his nephew. "This innocent country," Baldwin writes, "set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish" (335). Written to a child, the words could not be more disturbing or haunting. The child's life is cast by history. Pessimism is race realism, a nihilistic prognostication about the meaning of black life in the ghetto. Indeed this is where the word *ghetto* functions as a conceptually thick notion in Baldwin's work, rather than being a mere sign of an older vocabulary. Ghetto is a construction, as much a zone of memory and violence as it is geographic designation with borders policed by weapons and wealth, a world made in order to reproduce the racial order. That reproduction, Baldwin



continually reminds us, is through the casting of young black life as being-toward-meaningless-death; *perish* is the most vacant form of dying, a note on the racial ledger, and yet also a way of dying that says everything about the meaning of America and its democratic life. White people's belonging to the nation, and to each other, turns on this nihilism and violence. The hustler expresses resistance, but a vain and sad resistance.

I am thinking as well of how Harlem figures in Baldwin's early nonfiction as a template or exemplary case what he calls "the Negro in America." It is a story told from the side of the Negro, of course: the story of the hustlers in Harlem, what they offer and how they seduce, is a key element of Baldwin's nihilistic characterization of the racial condition in *The Fire Next Time*. And from the side of the white American, whom Baldwin will always portray as parasitic on the abject condition of black people, drawing the life of their identity from the suffering of black bodies, communities, spirits, and life, black life is fated to death almost by nature. Therein lies the claim to superiority and justification for domination. Both iterations of the Negro in America derive from the same mythic place of African Americans in the idea of America and Americanness. We saw that above in Baldwin's paradoxical remark in "Princes and Powers," that this place, this home, was won through travail and blood *even though this place wants nothing to do with black people*. Nothing to do, but of course also everything to do. Parasites all the way down. Baldwin puts it concisely in "Many Thousands Gone":

The Negro in America, gloomily referred to as that shadow which lies athwart our national life, is far more than that. He is a series of shadows, self-created, intertwining, which now we helplessly battle. One may say that the Negro in America does not really exist except in the darkness of our minds.

This is why his history and his progress, his relationship to all other Americans, has been kept in the social arena. He is a social and not a personal or human problem; to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence; it is to be confronted with an endless cataloguing of losses, gains, skirmishes; it is to feel virtuous, outraged, helpless, as though his continuing status among us were somehow analogous to disease—cancer, perhaps, or tuberculosis—which must be checked, even though it cannot be cured. (66)

This last bit is crucial. The analogy of disease underscores how the problem of antiblack racism is a constant moral crisis that gives rise to edifying principles of democracy (our "highest ideals and aspirations") and moral tales (the protest novel, heroic political struggle), as well as, at the same time, a foundation piece of the American social, cultural, and political structure. This is precisely why the question of democracy in Baldwin is so complicated, even offensive. If the Negro in America exists only in the darkness of our minds, then what does it mean to claim belonging or fold that sense of belonging into the aspirational ideals of the

nation? Pessimism resists dialectical thinking here, turning instead to the inevitability of and thoroughly calculable phenomenon of black suffering and death. The ghetto was created so that Baldwin's nephew *should* perish. Not *could* or *might*, but *should*. Necessity, requirement, inevitability. The nation depends on it.

Baldwin made much of his early career on the basis of a sustained critique of Richard Wright's literary works, especially the classic *Native Son* and its companion piece *Black Boy*. There is a lot to be said about that critique, why Baldwin found it so necessary to take on and take down the most important black writer of his moment, but the relation to Wright and Wright's nihilism is also more complicated than the polemics might portray. In his polemics against Wright, Baldwin comes back again and again to the complexity of black life and the one-dimensionality of the same in the literary space of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. But Baldwin will never dispute the truth of Wright's argument and testimony; for all the criticism, Baldwin repeatedly comes back to the life of Bigger Thomas as a truncated, flawed, and ultimately damaging vision of black life, but nonetheless a truth about life under an antiblack regime. The intractable despair and rage of Harlem, documented in so much detail in Baldwin's early fiction and nonfiction, is a constant reminder of this truth. Wright's nihilism, which is pervasive in his fiction all the way through later novels like *The Outsider*, erupts in violence and murder, always, and that seeming inevitability of violence disturbs Baldwin. Black people are not murderers, in fact, and that needs accounting; there is no space, Baldwin argues, for that accounting in Wright's imagination. That said, there is a foundational truth in Wright's novels. Rage is the condition of being black in the United States. Not a feature or an accident of occasional history, but the very condition of being. Baldwin underscores this by locating rage, generated by white racism and racial violence, inside the very being of black people. "No American Negro exists," Baldwin writes, "who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull" (77). Bigger Thomas, the protagonist in *Native Son*, is in the very consciousness of being black in the United States, an inheritance of history and its repetition in the ghetto, in everyday racism, in the intractability of racist violence at the foundation of the nation. This "dangerous and unloved stranger" named Bigger is "part of himself forever."

For Baldwin, this does not trouble his criticism of Wright. Rather, it is a given in the racial order of the nation. Harlem names the geography of this skull, mapping the effects and affects of the life of Bigger Thomas inside the skull of a people across the cityscape. As a social and political production—antiblack racism makes the ghetto—and also as the foundation of the habits of ghetto life: the hustler, the despair, the nihilism. Thinking through the resistance to this, how black life is *more than* and *exceeds* this social and political production, is the critical companion piece to Baldwin's critique of Wright and the site of his nuanced, peculiar articulation of belonging in an antiblack world. From nihilism to a finely attuned sense of hope.

## BECOMING EVERYDAY

In “Many Thousands Gone,” Baldwin’s account of “the Negro in America” sets the Negro at the heart of what America means. This is an important twist. Antiblack racism is not a feature of American identity, nor is it an occasional aberration of purer, more fundamental values. Democracy is not compromised by antiblackness. Rather, the abjection of black life makes the entirety of the democratic nation *work*. Senses of belonging are dependent upon senses of exclusion and abjection of *necessity*. This is the difficult truth and the complexity of bringing the question of democracy to bear on Baldwin’s work.

And yet, as Baldwin notes, that abjection is not itself the concretion of life—or at least not *all* of life. Wright’s fiction overestimates the reach of antiblackness while also documenting its intractable truths. Bigger Thomas is in the skull, but the skull lives many lives. There is the compulsion to violence, yes, but also the compulsion to create meaning outside that violence and its attempt to control the totality of black life. Nihilism is *part* of the story of “the Negro in America,” but there is the life on the margins of that nihilism, the art and feeling and connection in the interstices of the American social order. There is, in a word, also the African American *tradition*. Of the nihilistic figure of the Negro, Baldwin writes: “We do not know what to do with him in life; if he breaks our sociological and sentimental image of him we are panic-stricken and we feel ourselves betrayed. When he violates this image, therefore, he stands in the greatest danger . . . and, what is not always so apparent but is equally true, we are then in some danger ourselves—hence our retreat or our blind and immediate retaliation” (66).

Baldwin writes in the first-person plural here, writing from the perspective of *we* to situate his remarks as American *as such*. That is, the American as produced by the cruel racial dialectics that make white and black Americans out of abjection and hate. Violation of that image—and it *is* an image, an image out of which so much is made—leads to perplexity at the level of the social order. We can think here of microaggressive tropes, too many to list. *You’re so articulate. You’re so educated. You’re not “black” black.* Noncompliance with the imaginary Negro in America, any break with the Bigger Thomas living in the skull of *every* American, is a social and political crisis. At the level of the social order, it leads to perplexity at best, catastrophic violence and destruction at worst. Every social order is oriented toward the reproduction of itself. Disruption meets resistance. Disruption is already so much resistance.

It is also here that Baldwin’s criticism of Wright is so very significant in opening up another sense of black life. While he does acknowledge the enduring truth of Wright’s nihilism—who could dispute the rage produced by centuries of antiblack racism and subjection?—there is also Baldwin in “Many Thousands Gone” asking about “the black man” and “what to do with him in life.” What is life? What is the *in* of being “in life”? This is for Baldwin a shift away from thinking about African

Americans as a “social” problem, toward thinking about the “personal or human problem” (66). After the sociological or sentimental construction of black life, or perhaps before it, there is the humanization project—the project to which Baldwin was so deeply committed.

Let us consider what Baldwin understands to be the precondition of his writing. Baldwin’s nonfiction, in nearly every iteration, is a version of self-reckoning; he is the master of the personal essay. Sometimes this self-reckoning is writ large, with Baldwin’s life standing in for the broader and broadest inter- and intraracial realities of American life. This is often the site of Baldwin’s nihilism as race realism; his explorations of a childhood in Harlem function as a narrative of African American suffering, memory, and history. Sometimes the self-reckoning is messianic, oriented toward the future and drawing on the latent possibilities and promises of existing forms of life, as with the concept of a redemptive and wholly fiat form of love in *The Fire Next Time*. But there is also the self in the present, which is where Baldwin rewrites, upends, and criticizes pathology and deficiency narratives of African American life. For example, if we think of two midcentury compatriots in the black Atlantic context, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, the contrast could not be bolder. Césaire and Fanon both argue against the present, looking to a past (Césaire) that elevates black people with the profundity of civilization and its traces or eschewing past and present in an apocalyptic vision of futurity as pure break (Fanon, but also elements of Césaire’s early poetry). In many ways Wright’s fiction can be read as a version of this apocalyptic thinking, just without the intervening optimism. Against this, and against his *own* senses of nihilism, Baldwin posits the profundity and complexity of vernacular culture as a meaning- and world-making force.

This shift is reflected in Baldwin’s description in the early essay “What It Means to Be an American” of his writerly condition, how home travels into and with exile to form the possibility of writing Black life. “Armed with two Bessie Smith records and a typewriter,” Baldwin writes, “I began to try to recreate the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight” (172). For me, this is one of the richest evocations in Baldwin’s nonfiction. It carries so much meaning in the medium of sound, witnessing the capacity of music to articulate cultural resistance as beauty and expressive life. On the one hand, it pays homage to a foundational figure in African American cultural production, Bessie Smith, which, through that figure, draws Baldwin close to the Mississippi Delta, Memphis as distillation of country and city, and the blues tradition that carries the oldest memories of New World life in the United States. Sound and culture connect Baldwin’s life in Harlem, black life through and through, to the travail of the forefathers, the blood shed in the work done to reclaim a sense of right and title to place. And so, on the other hand, and in concert with this, Smith and the blues tradition tell something important about Baldwin’s conception of home. Home, that is, as a paradox of belonging in a place that does not want you, a place that

not only will not but cannot make a space for you. Smith accompanies the typewriter so that Baldwin is always close to, entwined with, and therefore able to tell the existential, memorial, and cultural story of home and belonging from exile.

The blues tradition, in Baldwin's hands, tells us about spaces of existence created by African Americans for African Americans. Blues, as affect as well as communal space, created (and creates in every act of listening) black spaces for black people, creates entire worlds of signification, meaning, and affect that neither exceed nor contradict the nation and its commitment to whiteness, but rather exist between and in the cracks of life in that nation. An interstitial identity, the sort of identity and expressive life to which Ralph Ellison famously gives testimony in the prologue of *Invisible Man*—life made, like Louis Armstrong's music, in the cracks and breaks of the rhythm of common public life. For Baldwin this is one of the *secrets* shared by African Americans, black life speaking to itself on its own terms, even when seated intimately with white people. We see this, for example, in *Another Country*, in which the interracial loves and friendships fracture, not because (or just because) of antiblack racism and its violent, corrosive effects and affects, but for the complicated reasons of impasses of understanding. Belonging, that sense of home and title to the land Baldwin evokes in "Princes and Powers," is not a matter of our higher aspirations as a nation or of our ideals and dreams. Rather, it is an extant condition of interstitial life in an antiblack world that offers no space or place for blackness. That world does not negate the possibility of blackness and its full expressive life. This is where Wright's work is truncated and must be troubled. We have to look elsewhere. The Bessie Smith record is one such elsewhere. With it and a typewriter, Baldwin is able to witness the beauty of black life at the very same moment in which antiblackness is drawn out, critiqued, and established as the foundational logic of the nation.

#### COMMUNITY OF THOSE WHO ARE GROUNDLESS

What, then, is all of this to the question of democracy?

Baldwin's texts offer a sustained critique of imagining democracy and democratic thinking to be anything like our higher ideals or aspirations. Indeed his meditations on antiblackness as a precondition of American identity, something on which whiteness and certain forms of blackness in fact depend, inscribe racial tyranny into the very heart of what it means to be American. "This Republic," Baldwin writes in the late work *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, "has, indeed, told itself and Black people nothing but lies, which is the very definition of the betrayal of the social contract."<sup>4</sup> What we are to make of this betrayal, how we process the meaning of "the social contract," and what it means to have failed it, tell us so much of how Baldwin conceives democracy and democratic thinking between nihilism and hope.

4 James Baldwin, *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Holt, 1995), 107.

The enigma of the social contract lies in the specific condition of American-ness. This condition preoccupied so much of the early Baldwin, especially his nonfiction written in exile. I am thinking here of two interrelated readings of racial identity and identification. One of the interesting twists in Baldwin's theorization of blackness and whiteness is his double-reading of identity. The first reading follows what has come to be called the social construction of race: engagement with the political and social *reality* of racial identification, whatever the metaphysics of identity or nonidentity might want to argue. Baldwin understands the conditions under which blackness is formed as abject to be a political project; the very meaning of the republic turns on such a formation. The second reading does not so much undercut as dismantle the thin grounds of a socially constructed identity. Baldwin's writings from Europe explore the common ground of white and black Americans, one that creates a similar origin story without obscuring the realities of antiblackness. To be American is to be cut off from roots, whether that is the rootlessness of black people in the Americas forged in the slave trade or the break from European traditions, languages, and identities among white Americans. The difference is clear and obvious: forced migration is not the same as immigration and beginning anew. But the phenomenon of rootlessness is crucial, and a key to thinking about the dynamics of place, social construction of identity, and imagining a future. When Baldwin writes about encountering white Americans in Paris, it is always a complex moment. Conversations happen in Paris that could not happen in, say, Atlanta, precisely because when Americans are cut off from the racial formations that structure American life, there is the inevitability of recognition, of shared ontological meaning despite it all. *I see you. Like me, you do not belong here in France, we belong in America, because this is not our place of rootedness. We are both unrooted, estranged, strangers who made a village in the New World.*

The result, then, is a sense of being and identity that is inseparable from the American in racial designation: white *American*, black *American*. *White* and *black* name not rooted identities but fictions made in context of groundlessness, forged out of a kind of desperation on the part of white Americans to invent not just a past but a past that allows claims of superiority to resonate across social, cultural, and political life. Whiteness is created as a projection out of European-descended Americans' collective desire to justify what the institutions of American life produce and reproduce at every turn: subjugation of black people and its companion piece, the veneration of whiteness from the aesthetic to the metaphysical. Across-the-board supremacy, not as a scientific ideal but as a founding fiction of Americanness, the story told as the justification for the republic and its social order. Race realism is just this recognition, that white people do not know themselves except as agents of antiblackness. Black people know otherwise, configured as a very particular kind of double consciousness that knows the white gaze, internalizes it, but also makes a world outside that gaze. The key for Baldwin is that this fiction is laid on top of groundlessness, a shared groundlessness and anxiety, which is then mythically posited as a foundation in or on something that cannot

ground or found. Myths are powerful. They create and re-create social forms. Every nation is narration. And yet the racial stories of the American republic are just that, myths, stories pulled out of the desperate imaginations of lost people. Adrift. Abandoned. Cruel. Whiteness and blackness as social and political phenomena emerge out of this terrifying storytelling. What does it mean to imagine and reimagine the self and the collective *inside* this story? What does it mean to not just survive and resist but thrive in relation to the realism about race and its necropolitical fate?

When we read it in this frame, Baldwin's remark in *The Fire Next Time* that he does not wish to be integrated into "a burning house," a comment important enough to be repeated in *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, takes on a bit more texture. The remark initially reads like frustration with the recalcitrance of white Americans, the plain and enduring refusal to modify affects and politics of supremacy. And also how certain iterations, namely the Nation of Islam, seem to reify and reproduce the same logic of liberation as power over others whether political, psychological, or mythical. This is certainly Baldwin's meaning. But there is also the deeper question of the construction of the nation's house as a space of self-creation out of groundlessness. Racial construction, deriving a sense of whiteness out of the abjection of blackness and locking blackness into that abjection, makes a house that is on fire *from the outset*. It has always been aflame. That is, any sense of the democratic in the idea of the United States has to come after or outside the construction of the nation as we have known it. The values are neither pure nor outside the formation of racial identities and their reproduction, and thus the kinds of racial order and exploitation reproduced as Americanness. There was no authentically democratic house later set on fire by racial violence; the burning house is originary, as it were, a condition of the nation's beginning.

This is why Baldwin's own vision of the future is always messianic, calling for the destruction of the existing order in the name of a hitherto unknown, unprecedented sense of value, social space, and political meaning. Baldwin's sensibility is not for the sake of shock or outrage. Rather, it is derived from the impossibility of imagining a world in which basic social actions, from belonging to treason, might have shared political value and meaning. We can think here of Baldwin's late essay "The Price of the Ticket," in which he reflects on watching Muhammad Ali refuse conscription into the army. What does that moment reveal about black life and the American social order? Is it protest? Or is it something deeper? Baldwin writes of Ali's refusal of service in Vietnam:

I have never been able to convey the confusion and horror and heart-break and contempt which every black person I then knew felt. Oh, we dissembled and smiled as we groaned and cursed and did our duty. . . . The romance of treason never occurred to us for the brutally simple reason that you can't betray a country you don't have (Think about it.). Treason draws its energy from the conscious, deliberate betrayal

of a trust—as we were not trusted, we could not betray. And we did not wish to be traitors. We wished to be citizens. (xv)

The structure of this *wish*, both what it says about the folding of the past into the present and what it says about the interval of the present and the future, is nothing less than the ultimate meaning of the *demos* and the *polis* for Baldwin. Writing at the end of his writerly life, Baldwin draws his long meditation on despair and also his resistance to the purity of nihilism that *might* follow from it: in the wake of so much terror, there is still the imagination and its capacity to think not the details but the basic affective form of another *demos* and another, albeit unrecognizable, *polis*.

How are we to think about thinking in this context? Larger political questions of mobilization, counterhegemony, and revolutionary life and action can find important resources in Baldwin's work. Such resources *prompt* thinking from the thoughtfulness of identity formation at the margins, back toward new thinking about democratic transformation at (or against) the center of the *polis*. Antagonistic, perhaps even revolutionary, thinking from and with Baldwin against hegemony is fundamentally creative work.<sup>5</sup> Baldwin's own work in his nonfiction is oriented toward a different set of concerns. Those concerns are largely dedicated to witnessing the power of antiblackness and the even more profound power of resistance and cultural formation in the face of American antiblack racism. Witnessing is not, strictly speaking, prognostication or political programming. At the same time, the messianic character of Baldwin's thinking is an interruption of witnessing *for the sake of this sort of creative work*.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, I would argue, the strictly political contribution of Baldwin's work lies in its provocation between nihilism and hope. Constrained by the intractable truths of race realism as nihilism, broken up by the persistence of hope and meaning lived on/in the margins and cracks, thinking *with* Baldwin is an invitation to rethink Americanness itself. Beyond racial innocence. Beyond formal abstractions of equality and rights and freedom. Toward a justice that cognizes, for the first time, the title to land won by suffering and everyday forms of resistance.

The puzzle, then, is reconciling the two directions of Baldwin's thoughts on place and belonging. The existential and cultural sense of belonging, the relation African Americans bear to one another that is carried by the Bessie Smith record, denotes an interstitial politics. A polis on the edge of the polis, full of resistance and meaning and life outside the subjugating white gaze, the sort of shift

5 An excellent series of examples of this sort of creative work can be found in the recent edited collection by Susan J. McWilliams, *A Political Companion to James Baldwin* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2017), which covers a range of theoretical and practical questions of racial politics in a Baldwinian register.

6 George Shulman's piece "Baldwin, Prophecy, Politics" (in *Political Companion to James Baldwin*) is an excellent and compelling intervention drawing from precisely these motifs.



in meaning and community making that parallels Michael Dawson's notion of the black counterpublic. But whereas Dawson's notion, developed in his *Black Visions*<sup>7</sup> and elsewhere, is an ambitious theory of ideology and the capacity of social organization to develop a wide sense of political expression and mobilization, Baldwin's aim is more modest. For Baldwin, this counterbelonging is a question of self-knowledge as both personal and communal, engaged with the existential and the memorial and historical. This is why Baldwin will repeatedly say that black people know themselves and remain unknown to white people. And there is also the wider sense of belonging and participation, which, for Baldwin, has to radically exceed the logic of integration. The burning house is no lure or ideal. So the anecdote about Ali is ultimately revealing: the possibility of African American treason is an aspiration. What would it mean to have a world in which treason was even a possibility? This is an unrecognizable world. But in imagining it, insofar as we can, Baldwin works from the margins toward a new center, from the interstitial sense of identity back toward a novel, new vision of collective life. Therein lies the importance of racial formation in his thinking of democratic belonging and social order: black identity is formed in relation to self, whereas whiteness is formed in a relation of subjugation and exploitation. Any future of democratic thinking and acting has to work with this strange crossing of identities—one, the preservation of blackness as vernacular culture and form of life, the other, an abolition of whiteness. Out of that preservation and abolition is the hope of democracy, not as an existing ideal or core value as of yet unfulfilled but as an unprecedented, unimaginable relation of the rootless as a community. Roots laid, then, in the wake of nihilism, in the name of hope. Democracy takes on meaning for the first time. In a time to come.

7 Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

## 22: Malcolm X

### Dispatches on Racial Cruelty<sup>1</sup>

Nikhil Pal Singh

*There is one thing that every black in America has in common with the rest: it is that he has at some time or another been exposed to the whims of the police. And this, to untold millions has symbolized what the white man means by the Bill of Rights—for the black man.*

Malcolm X, draft chapter from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1963)<sup>2</sup>

*King and I have nothing to debate about. We are both indicting. I would say to him: "You indict and give them hope; I'll indict and give them no hope."*

Malcolm X to George Plimpton (1964)

Malcolm X is one of the most iconic black radical thinkers and activists of the second half of the twentieth century. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, published posthumously and crafted by journalist Alex Haley, who interviewed Malcolm over fifty times during the last two years of his life, is the point of entry for most interpretations of his significance. The autobiography is a classic bildungsroman, told as a series of traumatic events and including two conversion narratives that unfold along widening arcs of Malcolm's growing personal maturity, political activism, and public influence. Born in 1925, one of eight children, Malcolm endured an early childhood marked by racial violence and state neglect, including arson that destroyed his childhood home, and the murder of his father, an outspoken supporter of Marcus Garvey, events he attributed to organized white supremacists. It included severe economic hardship, culminating in his mother's institutionalization in a state mental hospital and Malcolm's identification as a juvenile delinquent, followed by a career as a flamboyant street hustler and petty

1 In memory of our brilliant colleague Joe Wood, who departed before his time, with special thanks to Chip Turner and Melvin Rogers for their patience and acumen, and especially Thulani Davis for reading, guidance, and critical suggestions.

2 This passage is from a chapter that was cut from the autobiography. Alex Haley Book outline, 1963, folder 37, box 1, Ken McKormick Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, quoted in *The Portable Malcolm X Reader*, ed. Manning Marable and Garret Felber (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 249.

criminal, arrest and imprisonment lasting seven years. In prison Malcolm Little underwent his first important conversion to the Nation of Islam (NOI), taking the name Malcolm X and embracing a religiously conservative and sectarian form of black nationalism.

Malcolm X steadily grew in local and national prominence as a black Muslim preacher and grassroots activist, achieving a stature that led to rivalry and confrontation with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, who gave him his platform as the organization's national spokesman. The aftermath of Malcolm's break from the NOI and torments he endured from rivals in that organization were under way even as he and Haley were creating the documentary account of his life. By the time the autobiography was readied for publication, Malcolm X had emerged on the national and world stage, a widely known black militant and founder of the new Organization for Afro-American Unity (OAAU). In his last years he amplified his commitment to anticolonial struggles around the world in well-publicized trips to Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, overseas travels that were also closely watched by US intelligence agencies. The autobiography ends with Malcolm's second conversion to an ecumenical form of Sunni Islam during a pilgrimage to Mecca, where he also adopted his final name, el Hajj Malik el-Shabbaz. He was assassinated in 1965 at the age of thirty-nine.

Like Frederick Douglass the century before him, Malcolm X is best known for the exemplary use he made of his compelling life story. His personal narrative was an organizing tool, a lesson in how to rewrite a history of disaster into a tale of redemption through knowing the self and coming to influence the wider world. Yet where Douglass's "slave narrative" marked an irreversible passage from bondage to a righteous freedom and future black struggles for equality, the elements of Malcolm X's narrative—serially martyred kin, institutional neglect by schools and social services, hustling for survival, police violence and criminal punishment—became ever more common aspects of the life of the black urban poor in the decades to come, with no clear pathway to redemption in sight for the great majority of them. "Malcolm's Malcolm"—as literary scholar Arnold Rampersad described the version of the man he wanted immortalized in the autobiography—developed into a citizen-diplomat with strongly internationalist and anticolonial sensibilities, who at the end of his life had arrived at an evolved vision of multihued planetary humanism. Yet at its root, Malcolm's iconic stature and gravitas never cast off the strong associations with the more debased and violent elements of his life story.

Malcolm X is worth confronting most of all because he was one of the black political tradition's most acerbic and exacting pathologists of the American racial order. Just before the end of his life, as his disclosures to journalists and confidants revealed, he understood that his lasting influence was tied less to a record of durable achievement in realms of activism, institution-building, or political thought than to life lessons that sharpened public perception of an enduring proximity

of blackness, violence, and premature death.<sup>3</sup> One searches in vain across his writings and speeches for a fully developed economic, structural, or materialist account of the formations of racialized disparity. Malcolm was above all a moralist, one who lifted prohibitions on what could be publicly said and in doing so sharpened the ethical basis and intellectual coherence of black collective life as something irreducibly shaped by violent subjection, common exclusion and material deprivation within the United States. Reading the world and its significance from the most intimate and embodied, local and urban scales of black life, he consciously inverted the valences assigning US blackness to public disposability and segregated provincialism. In doing so, he illuminated the world-making significance of US racism and black opposition to it that continues to roil liberal dreams of racial progress and shared prosperity, both at home and abroad.

### A Fugitive Archive

To approach Malcolm X as an intellectual and as a political theorist poses a number of challenges. From the posthumous reception of Haley's transcribed work, to the rediscovery of Malcolm X in the era of hip-hop and the drug war with the success of Spike Lee's 1992 blockbuster film, to the publication of Manning Marable's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*—a book that consciously punctures Malcolm's status as an irreproachable militant—questions about Malcolm X's life have persistently sidetracked or overwhelmed careful assessments of his thought. His archive of diaries and letters was neglected for decades by his family and released only a few years ago. His former associates from the Nation of Islam—some of them, including Minister Louis Farrakhan, implicated in his murder—have been notoriously uncooperative and unreliable adjutants of the historical record. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which looms so large in shaping his influence, has inspired scholarly pursuit of the “real” or “historical” Malcolm X as someone refracted through a mountain of government surveillance (much of it still redacted) and transcriptions of a voluminous oratory by parties interested in claiming him for posterity. Scholars have probed the traumatic events that Malcolm described as bookending his life—the lynching of his father, the torching of family homes in Lansing and Queens—asking if they happened the way he described them. Assessments of his significance, in turn, continually divide: Is Malcolm best understood through his statesmanlike conversion to a worldly and racially integrative vision of Islam, or did the brutal racial hustle and bustle forever cast the mold of his ideas and influence? Can Malcolm the pathologist of racism be rescued from the devastating consequences of the racist pathologies he forensically diagnosed upon the course of his own life?

3 See Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Penguin, 2011), and Jared Ball and Todd Steven Burroughs, *A Lie of Reinvention: Correcting Manning Marable's Malcolm X* (Baltimore: Black Classic, 2012).

In contrast to his contemporary and frequent foil Martin Luther King Jr., who wrote extensively, presided over lasting organizations, and influenced major legislation and policy changes, Malcolm X remains subject to a more fugitive pursuit. It is tempting, for example, to opt for a view that casts him essentially as a provocateur (“the prophet of black rage,” as contemporary black intellectual Cornel West has called him).<sup>4</sup> Malcolm’s sometime debate opponent, seasoned civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, charitably remembered, “Malcolm always had the last and most exciting words.”<sup>5</sup> US Supreme Court justice and civil rights legend Thurgood Marshall was less kind, concluding derisively. “All he did was talk.”<sup>6</sup> Malcolm X’s critics and sparring partners suggested over and over again, in his time and in subsequent years, that his political ideas failed to cohere into an effective philosophy, narrative, or strategy of black collective organization and struggle, or to develop beyond the charged interpersonal politics of racial affect and symbolism. In their anthology *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (1965), Francis Broderick and August Meier, two well-informed white progressives and racial liberals, illustrate how scholars viewed Malcolm X in his own time. He was someone, they write, who “epitomized Negro alienation with American society,” a man born of “flamboyant utterances and free publicity.”<sup>7</sup>

Although Malcolm X was the agent of his own narrative of transformation, he did not live to be the curator of his own archive. The gaps between the two have produced a host of interesting puzzles. A major paradox of his life is that it was during his most sectarian, religiously obscure, and racially separatist phase within the NOI that he commanded and substantially increased a large local

4 Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 93.

5 “Reminiscences of Bayard Rustin: Oral History, 1987,” in *Portable*, 190. Rustin recalls what he said to him before their debate at Howard in 1961 (the event that established Malcolm X’s legitimacy within the civil rights conversation): “You’ll present your view and I’ll present mine which says that you’re a fraud. You have no social, no economic program for dealing with the black community and its problem” (185).

6 Quoted in Joe Wood, “Malcolm X and the New Blackness,” in *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, ed. Joe Wood (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992), 15.

7 Francis L. Broderick and August Meier, “Malcolm X v. James Farmer: Separatism v. Integration,” in *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 357. Malcolm X would also play dirty. In his 1963 debate with CORE’s James Farmer at Cornell, he begins with a lengthy and thoughtful disquisition on the international context of black struggles in the US: “White people . . . are losing their ability to dictate unilateral terms to dark mankind.” In rebutting Farmer’s paean to integration (“I tell you that we are Americans. This is as much our country as it is white American. Negroes came as slaves. . . . Many white people came as indentured servants”), Malcolm X turned again to the cruel cut of sex and gender in which race was lived: “I hadn’t thought, or intended anyway, to get personal with Mr. Farmer in mentioning his white wife; I thought that it would probably have been better left unsaid, but it’s better for him to say it than for me to say it, because then you would think I was picking on him.” (Farmer had mentioned his wife in his prepared remarks in response to an earlier attack upon him for it in *Muhammad Speaks*, the newspaper of the NOI. See Broderick and Meier, “Malcolm X v. James Farmer,” 380.

base of support within black urban communities across the country (according to Marable's estimates the size of the NOI membership exploded during Malcolm X's time in the organization, from around a thousand to around seventy-five thousand).<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the intensification and broadening of his secular political commitments and his religiously ecumenical turn toward the end of his life saw him increasingly isolated, flirting with a range of potential allies and casting about for a constituency. Upon his death, Malcolm X was immediately claimed by scattered groups of revolutionary socialists and emerging black power militants who variously embraced his pronouncements on anti-imperialism, armed self-defense, and (less plausibly) international socialism, even as it was a young black Christian conservative integrationist, Alex Haley, drawn by his story of bootstraps uplift and his rise through moral abstemiousness, who immortalized him for posterity.

Harlem-based actor and activist Ossie Davis offered one of the first but also most durable contributions to the creation of the Malcolm X legend in his famous eulogy describing the slain leader as "our living black manhood . . . our own shining black prince—who didn't hesitate to die because he loved us so."<sup>9</sup> But this conventional, masculinist sacralization of Malcolm X actually obscures the more distinctive and live qualities of his gesture and voice: how he audibly scratched against the normalized containment of blackness within the confines of cautious movement, calculated self-preservation, conditioned modesty, and respectability politics, how he persistently evoked black suffering without counseling quiescence, and how he courted danger and even death without compensatory promises of redemption or salvation.

To understand Malcolm X's importance for political thought, then, it is necessary to read against the grain of both a tendency to dismiss him and a no less insistent impulse to idealize him by recourse to a developmental narrative hinged to his life course. Against a search for narrative coherence and the adjudication of the truth of reported experience demanded by the best historical biographies, or enjoining the debates between partisans and detractors, arriving at the significance of Malcolm X's political ideas requires a different approach, one that seeks to contextualize the fragments of his words and changing course of his life and public affiliations in relationship to the major social and political movements and intellectual currents that he engaged. Complicating this challenge is the fact that Malcolm X was in constant, rapid motion during the brief span of his most politically and intellectually active years; he was trying to make sense of, and to make a public impact upon, the contentious, historically transformative era in which he was living—the moment of civil rights, the Cold War, and decolonization—

8 Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 123.

9 "Ossie Davis' Stirring Tribute to Malcolm X," *Amsterdam News*, March 6, 1965, in *Portable*, 402–3.

learning fitfully, experimentally, and fatefully. A creature of publicity (not all of it sought), he learned to weigh his words for how they might move or provoke a given audience. Through all of it, the most consistent theme was his searing indictment of American racism, one that removed all redemptive piety, or hope for rehabilitation or reconciliation, from the prosecutorial brief.

When it came to black people, Malcolm X argued, the United States practiced *racial cruelty* first. He understood reflexively, moreover, that the force of his own words derived from what that cruelty had wrought. As black writer and scholar Thulani Davis has put it, “Malcolm emboldened a lot of us to investigate the ways our thinking and feeling about blackness had been taken prisoner before we were born.”<sup>10</sup> Malcolm was in this sense neither primarily a political organizer nor a systematic thinker, but more like a performance artist. A conscious intention of the race-baiting insults like “blue-eyed devil,” or “that pale old thing” that peppered his speeches was to release his black audience from any reticence they might have had about treating their white antagonists (or “enemies” as he often called them) as they had been treated. In this way he sought to resuscitate an invigorating hatred from within self-punishing valences of depression and despair born of racist devaluation. To paraphrase Frantz Fanon (his contemporary), Malcolm understood in a visceral way that the need for change existed in “a raw and reckless state” in black lives and black consciousness. Racism was “a language of pure violence” and had to be confronted as such.<sup>11</sup>

To seriously consider Malcolm X’s thought we must also consider the fact that he trafficked in signs and signals as much as ideas. The product of an under-resourced, often chaotic urban soundscape, his most oft-quoted statements were zingers, oneliners, simplifying (even historically faulty) analogies, putdowns, and parables. The intellectual material that he produced (before it was recorded or transcribed) emerged in bursts of sonic invention—performative utterances relayed in public addresses and interlocutory dialogues.<sup>12</sup> For our purposes here, we may scrutinize his language for hidden layers of meaning, ideological orientations, context, accuracy, or explanatory potential (for example, his well-known and problematic disquisition on the “house Negro versus field Negro”). But he was also scattershot. Speeches given in furious succession on an exhausting schedule were spliced and remixed from occasion to occasion and designed to charge up mass audiences at the “grassroots” (a metaphor he famously popularized). Throughout it all (including in his vaunted final year) he remained a verbal pugilist, less eager to explain than to bother and confront. Malcolm, as James Baldwin put it, “was speaking to the bitter and unanswerable present.” Eschewing the

<sup>10</sup> Thulani Davis, personal communication.

<sup>11</sup> As Fanon writes: “In the colonial world, the colonized affectivity is kept on a knife’s edge like a running sore flinching from a caustic agent.” Malcolm in turn became the caustic agent. Frantz Fanon, “On Violence,” in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1961).

<sup>12</sup> Adolph Reed, “The Allure of Malcolm X,” in *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, 207.

discursive weaving characteristic of hopes of racial reform and reconciliation, he practiced a kind of discursive cleaving. His most common metaphors cut.<sup>13</sup>

Malcolm clearly drew on established legacies of racial uplift, including Garveyism, and the longer black nationalist tradition extending back to Crummel and Delany. However, a restorative vision of the black past or race conservation was not at the core of his innovation. Malcolm X never had any credible public sanction as a black political leader; eventually the very group that gave him his first platform, but that quietly endorsed many normative constraints about what could be said about American racism, could not abide him either. Yet from his own clearly delineated experience of racial confinement born of the black working poor, he unprecedentedly seized a freedom to speak publicly about what almost a century of post-Emancipation white supremacist subjugation had largely forced into the domain of whisper, wish fulfillment, and humor. Like Ida B Wells, who half a century before him announced the pride of place of a Winchester rifle in every black home (even as she was forced to flee her hometown Memphis for dear life), Malcolm X ended the sotto voce proscription on threatening force and violence in defense of black life and limb—which meant that he ran afoul of police powers very early on: 1950, long before his rise to fame, is the date of his first FBI file entry.

In this way, Malcolm X represents a genuine departure in the history of black political thought and activism: the force of his ideas worked less toward the articulation of a strategic field of political action, or toward a coherent politics of collective representation, than toward a critical ontology of race as a material and embodied event.<sup>14</sup> As critic Joe Wood puts it, Malcolm X helped to make “blackness Black. . . . He stands for Black talk about Black thinking.”<sup>15</sup> Yet rather than reclaiming blackness from abjection in a manner signaled by late-1960s slogans like “Black is beautiful,” Malcolm insisted on foregrounding blackness as a domain of wreckage and salvage, bearing witness to the prevalence and persistence of violence and cruelty in the wake of racial slavery. The austere “facts of blackness” that he embodied and described represented a rejection of the coordinates of respectability, Christianity, and national belonging that had guided and sustained the majority of black struggles for justice within both American liberal and black nationalist traditions. Likewise, his affective politics and psychologically attuned discourse forcefully rejected what he characterized as submissive prematurity and one-sided disarmament of civil rights movement prescriptions of superior forbearance, mutual recognition, and interracial comity. As he memorably put it: “If you stick a knife in my back nine inches and pull it out six inches, there’s no progress. If you pull it all the way out that’s not progress. Progress is healing

13 James Baldwin, “Malcolm and Martin,” *Esquire* 77, no. 4 (April 1972).

14 Arun Saldanha, “Reontologizing Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006): 9–24.

15 Wood, “Malcolm X and the New Blackness,” 1.



the wound that the blow made. And they haven't even pulled the knife out much less heal the wound. They won't even admit the knife is there."

### The US and the World

Coming of age politically at the height of the Cold War, Malcolm X lived out his meteoric public life during the most vital phase of the black movement for citizenship rights and civic inclusion that so often proved his foil. His centrality and importance derives foremost from the sharpness and rigor of his assessment of the incompatibility of rising calls for justice for black people with long-standing racial and imperial prerequisites of US citizenship—or what he derisively termed America's "human problem." Although he lived in a time defined by the dialectical interplay of black social movements and governmental reform, Malcolm X was not particularly dialectical. The most important line running through his life and thought proceeds from starkly secular preoccupations with urban black life and premature death, sovereign violence and the force of law. From the standpoint of his own most intimate experiences of police and prison, he developed a merciless indictment of America's emerging "empire-state" and global police power, forces that he suggested rendered civil rights remedies pale and inconsequential.<sup>16</sup> Black people, he implied, were not just prisoners of an unjust racial order but prisoners of war. "Racism practiced by America," he argued in his very last speech, just days before he died, "involves a war against the dark-skinned people in Asia, another form of racism involving a war against dark-skinned people in the Congo . . . as it involves a war against the dark-skinned people in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Rochester, NY."<sup>17</sup>

Malcolm's method was to "play the dozens" with US nationalist mythologies, polite racial etiquette, reformist promises, and acceptable protest discourse, even as he fashioned a focused, consciously insider address to black urban working-class audiences he imagined forged into a durable constituency by shared anger, vulnerability, and responsibility. "We didn't land on Plymouth Rock, the rock landed on us," he memorably intoned, reminding his audience of the violence and victimhood that preceded and more importantly continued to shape American governing power over them.<sup>18</sup> As early as 1957 in a speech in Detroit, he staked out the political terrain that he would occupy over the next eight years: "If present leaders of the so-called American Negro, the intelligentsia, educators and intellec-

<sup>16</sup> For the concept of the US as an "empire-state," see Moon Kie Jung and Yaejoon Kwon, "Theorizing the US Racial State: Sociology since Racial Formation," *Sociology Compass* 7, no. 11 (2013): 927–40.

<sup>17</sup> "Not Just an American Problem, but a World Problem," Rochester NY, February 16, 1965, in *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder, 1989), 159.

<sup>18</sup> "Malcolm X's Audobon Address," Washington Heights, New York, March 29, 1964, <http://www.vlib.us/amdocs/texts/malcolmx0364.html> (accessed April 18, 2014).

tuals don't unite soon and take a firm stand with positive steps designed to eliminate the brutal atrocities that are being committed daily against our people . . . the little man in the street will begin to take matters into his own hands."<sup>19</sup> Not only did this speech foreshadow his break six years later with the Nation of Islam (NOI), a group notoriously hostile to political action by its members, but it also suggests something of Malcolm X's own shifting self-perception, slightly at odds with his posthumous lionization: he was himself the "little man in the street," someone who had been brutalized, with a sharp sense of his isolation from channels of influence but with pretensions to lead a black united front and outsized aspirations to change the (racial) order of things.

More uncompromisingly than any other figure during his time, though within a long tradition of black radical thinking from David Walker to Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X seized the opportunity to reframe the domestic politics of race within the United States in international terms and also in relationship to victims of American oppression worldwide. Drawing connections between racism and colonialism that midcentury US governing elites strenuously denied, his words positively jarred the dominant strains of American liberal reformist optimism and developmental discourse. An astute reader of Cold War logics and careful observer of international relations, he disturbed the hegemonic pretense, which became something of a banal truth after World War II, that visible signs of increasing racial equality comported with a liberal "American Creed," thus augmenting US claims to global leadership. In the late 1950s, the FBI agent trailing him recounted a meeting at Detroit Temple No. 1 of the NOI in which Malcolm X reportedly "blasted everything American," pointed out that "the entire black world is watching the events and incidents in North America," and showed an interest in the forum at the United Nations where "diplomats from the dark countries took to the rostrum to condemn this white government for the way it is treating the so-called Negro. Each one of the little black men who took to the rostrum said 'shame.' American diplomats thought foreign diplomats were taking the rostrum to condemn Russia for its actions in Hungary. They would have if the Little Rock attacks had not captured worldwide notice."<sup>20</sup>

Malcolm X learned quickly from his reading of a world scene that was starting to appear at his own doorstep (including a famous visit by Fidel Castro to Harlem's Theresa Hotel in 1960 on the eve of the Cuban communist revolutionary leader's first appearance before the UN General Assembly). He decided early on to throw a giant wrench into the machinery that assembled the Cold War with civil rights, according to which the promise of state protection of ordinary black rights to citizenship would be sealed with pro-US propaganda that "racism in America was on its way out" (as New York senator Adam Clayton Powell had argued at the

19 Malcolm X, "The Detroit Lecture Series," in *Portable*, 113.

20 Malcolm X FBI File, Summary Report, New York Office, April 30, 1958, in *Portable*, 108–12.

Bandung Conference in 1955), along with support for, or at least studied silence in the face of, bellicose anticommunism and overseas US military intervention. Not only did Malcolm X reject the premise and possibility of the normalization of black citizenship inside the US, but he seized every opportunity to attack US aggressions overseas as further evidence of its immoral, unreformable domestic racial order. After mocking the 1963 March on Washington (an event he attended in direct contravention of orders from NOI leader Elijah Muhammad) as “a farce on Washington . . . subsidized by white liberals and stage-managed by President Kennedy,”<sup>21</sup> he doubled down a short two months later with his infamous pronouncement following Kennedy’s assassination that the president’s death was “the chickens coming home to roost,” and that as “an old farm boy” he felt “glad.” This total breach of public decorum and patriotic deference alarmed even his staunchly separatist associates within the NOI (who, weirdly, sent a public telegram expressing condolences for the death of the leader of the government of white devils). This marked the beginning of the end of Malcolm X’s relationship with the group, but also a profound freeing of his growing secular, internationalist concern with black struggles for security and justice (terms that were always as important to him as the era’s more defining term: *freedom*).

Though seemingly spontaneous, “the chickens coming home to roost” was more than a casual statement or glib jibe; it was a radical reiteration of what the CIA called “blowback”: the idea that US state violence conducted in secret overseas might boomerang with unintended consequences on the domestic front. It also marked the beginning of a period in which Malcolm X accused the US of crimes against humanity—both “over here and over there”—with increasing force and clarity. He never commanded the range of historical reference of Du Bois, or the forensic skills of lawyer William Patterson, who as leader of the Civil Rights Congress presented a brief before the United Nations in 1951 accusing the US of “crimes . . . against the Negro people” under the UN Genocide Convention.<sup>22</sup> Yet from the moment he claimed to have befuddled US military recruiters during World War II with the suggestion that he was “frantic to join . . . the Japanese army,” or again in 1950 when he penned a letter from prison that stated, “I have always been a communist,” and expressing opposition to the Korean War, he evinced a stark black vernacular contempt for US patriotic pieties.<sup>23</sup> In the con-

21 “Minister Malcolm Exposes ‘Farce’ of D.C. ‘March,’” *Muhammad Speaks*, October 25, 1963, in Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, 240.

22 *We Charge Genocide* (Civil Rights Congress, 1951) offered careful documentation of police and mob violence against black people only in the years following 1945. Though ignored or smeared in mainstream commentary (in large part due to the communist associations of many of the CRC’s members), it built upon precedents of petitions by the National Negro Congress and the NAACP in previous years that had been presented to the UN secretary general.

23 “I have always been communist. I have tried to enlist in the Japanese Army in the last war, now they will never draft accept me in the US army. Everyone has always said MALCOLM is crazy; it isn’t hard to convince people I am.” The notoriety and following that Malcolm X gained

text of the Cold War, he became increasingly adept at dismantling the legitimating ideology that defined US global leadership in terms of its opposition to midcentury barbarisms without precedent: the killing fields and death camps of Europe he suggested were presaged by the killing time and slave plantations of the Middle Passage, and the violence was ongoing.

Later that year Malcolm X sealed his break with the Nation of Islam, delivering one of his most important speeches at the Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference convened by the radical Baptist minister Reverend Albert B. Cleage Jr. in Detroit. In “Message to the Grassroots,” Malcolm clearly delineated links between black freedom struggles and anticolonial movements in Asia and Africa that had emerged in the decade since the 1955 Bandung Conference. Although the speech continued his typical denunciations of civil rights liberals, including Dr. King, the occasion itself suggested new openings and potential synergies between labor and civil right militancy and revolutionary black nationalism that would presage a new era of Black Power politics after Malcolm’s death. The US and the world, Malcolm asserted, was undergoing a revolution. In a revolution, he declared, “You don’t do any singing, you’re too busy swinging. It’s based on land. A revolutionary wants land so he can set up his own nation, an independent nation.” Here Malcolm foregrounded a distinctive conceit of the program of the Nation of Islam—the focus on land—but tore it out of a framework that stressed petty property and small business ownership. Malcolm’s salient point was that the success of future black struggles hinged on an ability to credibly reclaim and successfully govern black urban space, neighborhoods, and institutions. Two of Detroit’s most important and creative black radicals, James and Grace Lee Boggs, instrumental to the convening that day, took notice. In an influential essay published three years later they announced, “The City is the Black Man’s Land,” tracing a direct line from “Message to the Grassroots,” to Malcolm’s last speeches, where “he made very clear his conviction that “Harlem is Ours! All the Harlem’s are Ours.”<sup>24</sup>

### Police Action

As much as any single figure during the 1960s rise of insurgent social movements, Malcolm X drew upon and rhetorically condensed an intellectual tradition that conceptualized black life and social existence in the US neither as simple contradiction to American liberal and democratic norms nor as a site of hopeless pathology and provincialism, but as the location of a generative and adversarial

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in prison as a convert to Islam in the early 1950s marked the beginning of his FBI file, which is where fragments of these letters are recorded. Malcolm X: FBI File, Summary Report, Detroit Office, March 16, 1954, in *Portable*, 66.

24 James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs, “The City Is the Black Man’s Land” (1966), in James Boggs, *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook: A James Boggs Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 165.

universalization. Within a long train of black nationalist and pan-Africanist thinkers, he thus rejected the designation “minority” that bound black people to a flawed American system, in order to illuminate connections to larger, potentially majoritarian transnational constituencies. Where earlier black thinkers framed this claim in terms of Enlightenment universalism and natural rights teleology, Malcolm insisted that the long history of racial disaster meant that the Euro-American formularies of rights were the ones who had lost any claim to special provenance. He put this plainly in a letter to the New York Police Department’s Bureau of Special Services (BOSS) protesting the police beating of Johnson X Hinton in 1955, notably his first directly organized political action and formal confrontation with US police power: “This outrageously inhuman act incenses not only our fellow citizens of the Harlem area, but also ignites great concern in the hearts of 600 million sons and daughters of Allah throughout the Moslem World, which stretches from the China Seas to the shores of West Africa.”<sup>25</sup> That “racial troubles in New York occupied more prominent space on the front pages here and in other parts of Africa,” and that “everyone seems aware of America’s color problems,” he noted during his first overseas trip three years later, was perhaps one of the few comforting that ideas that he carried with him in the years that remained.<sup>26</sup> Black people had not been abandoned, left alone with America:

Here in America, we have always thought that we were struggling by ourselves, and most Afro-Americans will tell you that, that we’re a minority. By thinking we’re a minority we struggle like a minority . . . It’s impossible for you and me to know where we stand until we look all around this earth. Not just look around in Harlem or New York, or Mississippi, or America—we have got to look all around this earth. . . . You don’t know where you stand in America until you know where America stands in the world. . . .

I say this, because it is necessary for you and me to understand what is at stake. You can’t understand what is going on in Mississippi if you don’t understand what is going on in the Congo. . . . They’re both the same, the same interests are at stake. The same sides are drawn up, the same schemes are at work.<sup>27</sup>

Malcolm X’s internationalism and the increasingly ecumenical, worldly account of blackness he promoted, particularly after his trip to Mecca, is central to the interpretation of his life that emphasizes his second conversion; it defines his life story as essentially one of ethical development—a “Negro mind reaching out” beyond debasing provincial origins to widen the circle of human belonging. The worldly blackness Malcolm embraced was protean—that is, it changed shape throughout his intellectual career as he variously connected it to worlds of color

25 Malcolm X to Stephen Kennedy, NYPD Bureau of Special Services (BOSS), November 2, 1957, in *Portable*, 85.

26 “Africa Eyes Us,” *Amsterdam News*, August 22, 1959, in *Portable*, 237.

27 New York, December 1964, in *Malcolm X Speaks*, 117, 125.

linked by Islam, African origin, struggles for decolonization, and perhaps even what might be called “not Euro-American” whiteness moving increasingly away from a phenotypically based racial discourse. If, as he puts it in *The Autobiography*, “it was in prison that I made up my mind to telling the white man about himself,” on his pilgrimage to Mecca “the feeling that hit me that there wasn’t any real color problem here. The effect was as though I had just stepped out of a prison.”<sup>28</sup> A great deal has been made of this statement for how it suggests a progressive, ideological transformation that brings Malcolm X into line with a more palatable, normative, and hopeful vision of antiracism and human progress.

I emphasize by contrast the consistent, contextual, and personally embodied sense of racial cruelty that Malcolm X foregrounded and attacked throughout his public career—the “prison” that he reminded us that he could not leave, particularly when on US soil. Malcolm’s second conversion—and the solace and inspiration he took in a vision of worldly alliances—never overrode his no less insistent and ongoing forensic pathology of American racism and the tributaries between the foreign and domestic it forged. That racism “is not just an American problem but a world problem” was the most insistent theme of the last year of his life; questions of racism could no longer be framed, let alone addressed, at the local scale. Returning to his infamous “chickens come home to roost” comment in a forum at Harvard Law School in 1964, he again identified the salient linkages between overseas and local police action: “Victims of racism, are created in the image of racists. . . . The recent situation in the Congo is one of the best examples of this. . . . In the Congo, planes were bombing Congolese villages, yet Americans read that American trained anti-Castro Cuban pilots were bombing rebel strongholds. . . . The victim is made a criminal. It is really mass murder—murder of women, children and babies. And mass murder is disguised as a humanitarian project.” He asks: “What effect does this have on Afro-Americans? . . . The white American government—not all white people—has shown just as much disregard for lives wrapped in black skin in Congo, as it shows for lives wrapped in black skin in Mississippi or Alabama.”<sup>29</sup>

Though Malcolm here addressed dramatic and sensational instances of extralegal violence against civil rights movement activists, the intensity of his convictions emerged from his own intimate familiarity with police violence in black urban areas. This was the source of many repeated calls to direct action and a key node in his thinking that connected his experiences in Harlem, Detroit, and Los Angeles with the police violence against civil rights protesters in the US South, US covert action in the Belgian Congo, and military intervention (called “police action”) in Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> Malcolm X was especially attuned to how the discretionary

28 Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 185, 321.

29 Malcolm X, “The Harvard Law School Forum of December 16, 1964,” in *The Speeches of Malcolm X at Harvard*, ed. Archie Epps (New York: William Morrow, 1968), 165–67.

30 He took yet another opportunity to refine his infamous comment in a 1965 interview: “Probably there is no better example of criminal activity against an oppressed people than the

domain of police power (“the whims of the police”) had been calibrated to the exercise of racial power along a continuum of private, extralegal, and state-sanctioned domains. He intuitively grasped something that more recent commentators have argued: modern police power developed as an emanation of the master’s power over the life and death of the slave.<sup>31</sup> Its consequent growth in the postbellum US employed the construction of racial difference as criminal threat as a primary technology for institutionalizing and aggrandizing the discretionary power of police. In the famous words of founding US political scientist John Burgess, “The police power of the commonwealths is the ‘dark continent’ of our jurisprudence, it is the convenient repository of everything for which our juristic classifications can find no other place.”<sup>32</sup> When Malcolm X writes a little over a half century later that the “whims of police” define what “the white man means by the Bill of Rights—for the black man,” he poses the issue with uncanny accuracy. For what constitutes blackness in a state of exception is not its exteriority to norm and law but its quality as an order of law written on black bodies.

Malcolm X’s focus on what I have been calling racial cruelty might be understood in this sense as a major tributary of the mode of politics and intellection he cultivated, and one that lies within a broader discourse of black radical and revolutionary thought (though not exclusively) that still shapes contemporary debates. Put in more specific terms, Malcolm X remained doggedly focused upon indicting the serial brutalities of the US racial order and imaginatively reversing its symbolic valences and institutional capabilities. If Du Bois confronted the growing sense of the social constructedness of racial discourse at midcentury by arguing that a black person is the one legally compelled to “ride Jim Crow in Georgia,” Malcolm X anticipated the stickiness of black ontology at the crooked, bloody end of the policeman’s nightstick. While his thinking variously trafficked in narrow and inclusive, crudely biological and more consciously ideological conceptions of race, he persisted in viewing the marking of race as an embodied social rela-

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role the US has been playing in the Congo through her ties with Tshombe and the mercenaries. You can’t overlook the fact that Tshombe gets his money from the US. The money he uses to hire these mercenaries—these paid killers imported from South Africa—comes from the US. The pilots that fly these planes have been trained by the US. The bombs themselves that are blowing apart the bodies of women and children come from the US. So I can only view the role of the United States in the Congo as a criminal role. And, I think the seeds she is sowing in the Congo she will have to harvest. The chickens that she has turned loose over there have got to come home to roost.” He then turned immediately to the question of Vietnam, with prophetic insight: “The same is true in Vietnam. It shows the real ignorance of those who control the American power structure. If France with all types of heavy arms, as deeply entrenched as she was in Indochina, couldn’t stay there, I don’t see how anybody in their right mind can think the US can get in there—it’s impossible. So it shows her ignorance, her blindness, her lack of foresight and hindsight; and her complete defeat in South Vietnam is only a matter of time.”

31 Marcus Dubber, *The Police Power: Patriarchy and the Foundations of US Government* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

32 John Burgess, *Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law* (Boston: Ginn, 1900), 2:136.

tion that emerged both individually and collectivity through horrific and ongoing acts of gratuitous violence.<sup>33</sup> The response he proposes at the opening rally of his only major secular political organizing effort, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), characteristically emphasizes fighting back: “It is the duty of every Afro-American person and every Afro-American community throughout this country to protect its people against mass murderers, against bombers, against lynchers, against floggers, against brutalizers and against exploiters.”<sup>34</sup> Here the accumulation of figurations of violence from flogging to bombing at once interpellates a continuous history, a story of ‘linked fate,’ and a potential source of unifying public action.<sup>35</sup>

More than the idea of black armed self-defense that he made common, and which after all had a long and distinguished pedigree and functioned as a kind of open secret especially for blacks in the South, Malcolm X embraced the critical potentialities of a black humanist pessimism, what Saladin Ambar calls “black anguish.”<sup>36</sup> In this sense he may be the most important midcentury exponent of the blackness of bare life, though in a manner that forces necessary revisions of the latter-day concept to include a concrete history of racial denigration.<sup>37</sup> If his contemporary Hannah Arendt lamented the debasement and diminution of the leftover, “merely human” in the face of robust orders of civic nationhood, Malcolm X derided the merely civil forms of inclusion that blacks had both achieved and aspired to in the United States as the veneer of ongoing violence and violation, in support of extracting value and extinguishing life. In this way he typically sharpened and deepened the philosophy of the NOI, where he first learned to hone his skills, and which regarded as fundamental the idea that “the American Negro” remained a slave of the state. Black social death was a structure, not an event, within American history and life; it required something more than civic inclusion or even economic opportunity as redress: a thoroughgoing reversal of the practices, norms, and valances of black devaluation.

### Hating Cruelty

One of the most challenging issues for those who uncritically lay claim to Malcolm X for black radicalism is how his emphasis on personal austerity, gender

33 This idea has received fullest elaboration from Frank Wilderson. See Frank Wilderson, *The Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

34 “Founding Rally of the OAAU,” June 1964.

35 For the concept of “linked fate” and the black public sphere, see Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

36 Saladin Ambar, *Malcolm X at the Oxford Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 167.

37 For an elaboration see Nikhil Pal Singh, *Race and America’s Long War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 104–5.



hierarchy, and black psychological and behavioral pathology (central themes of *The Autobiography* in particular) retain elements of a conservative racial uplift ideology with clear antiblack and sexist elements, as the policy age spanning from Moynihan (“benign neglect”) to Clinton (ending so-called welfare dependency) has reinforced. It is important here again to be attuned to historical context and specificity. Introducing Fannie Lou Hamer at a rally for his OAAU in 1964, Malcolm strained to blend his clear admiration for and solidarity with “Mrs. Hamer,” whom he respectfully described as “the country’s number one freedom-fighting woman,” with a characteristic impulse toward denigrating paternalism and patriarchal prerogative that for him always reduced to black male trials by violence: “We don’t deserve to be recognized and respected as men as long as our women can be brutalized in the manner that this women described. . . . We sitting around singing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ We need a Mau Mau.”<sup>38</sup> Throughout his life Malcolm X sustained valued relationships with women as collaborators and confidants—particularly his wife Betty Shabazz—but women nonetheless occupied the front line of his political thinking and concern only when their victimization animated a primary and primordial sense of the struggles of black men.<sup>39</sup>

More recently, consternation has developed around the late historian Manning Marable’s provocative contention that Malcolm X had extramarital affairs and homosexual encounters, with implications of a deeper layer of personal immorality, hypocrisy, and misogyny.<sup>40</sup> At the stubborn center of these concerns, yet rarely examined or acknowledged, is that Malcolm X had a felt grasp of blackness as a lived experience that was violently divided by sex and gender, as well as by a history of intraracial class differentiation (which Malcolm figured as an allegory of “the house Negro and the field Negro”). Few of his contemporaries talked of sex, gender, or divisions within the race as publicly or evinced such frankness about the self-shaming sexual cut of slavery as he did. “I learned to hate every drop of that white rapist’s blood that is in me,” he announces unsettlingly at the very outset of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.<sup>41</sup> Instead of dwelling on the truth or falsity of this statement, we might consider how it functions as a core conceit of his political thought. Malcolm X performatively marked his X, again and again. The X condenses the grammar of racial cruelty defined by sex, violence, and humiliation and also becomes the sign of the misanthropy, pessimism, and will to self-exile

38 “Malcolm X Introduces Fannie Lou Hamer,” December 20, 1964, Washington Heights, New York, in Pacifica Radio Archives, <https://www.pacificaradioarchives.org/recording/bb3528>.

39 The following statement (which is about as good as it gets) is often cited from his Paris interview in 1964: “One of the things I became thoroughly convinced of in my recent travels is the importance of giving freedom to the woman, giving her education, and giving her the incentive to get out there and put that same spirit and understanding in her children. And I frankly am proud of the contributions our women have made in the struggle for freedom and I’m one person who’s for giving them all the leeway possible because they’ve made a greater contribution than many of us men.” “The Role of Women,” in *Malcolm X Speaks*, 179.

40 Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*.

41 Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 2.

through which he defines his public persona. Not only are black people compelled by violence to suffer wrongs; they are made to embody the consequences of that violence over and again, from generation to generation.

Malcolm is unique in the pantheon of black activist intellectuals for the ways he developed intellectually within a homegrown, at times bizarre black Muslim theology (science fiction parables about an ancient mad scientist creating a race of white devils), and no less so by his later outreach and pursuit of a doctrinally orthodox, yet worldly and expressly nonracial religious conception of Islam. He was a stubbornly local, even parochial figure (Harlem was his home base)—and yet like just about any black person paying attention through the sweeping transformations of the decolonizing moment, he identified with anticolonial struggles and developed diasporic sensibilities that were continually being amplified. “The African,” he proclaimed on his first trip abroad in 1959, “is the man of tomorrow.”<sup>42</sup> Here the X with which he remains associated, even though it was neither the name with which he was born nor the one he had taken when he died, evokes a factor of “unknown quantity or force” linked to (black) modernist futurity, a great leap forward that he wished for, yet that also signified the dead weight of the slave past that never left his slightly stooped shoulders.<sup>43</sup> His unremitting sense of racial pessimism even competed at times with a hint of openness to pragmatic US-style pluralism: the idea that avenues of interest group politics by which white immigrant groups had advanced might not be forever closed to blacks (a vision that would soon be echoed by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton’s programmatic brief for black power). His condemnation in the words of an early FBI field report of “everything American” has cemented his meaning within radical memory to this day. His latter-day humanism made him into a figure worthy of a US postage stamp.

As I have argued, amidst these shifting, at times contradictory appropriations there is a more stubborn through line: Malcolm X launched a fusillade against midcentury racial liberalism from which it never recovered, and that continues to constellate the present. He rejected the idea that private, extralegal violence worked in opposition to legitimate state violence, outlining instead the tributaries that flowed between them. He refused to separate the workings of racial despotism within the territorial United States from a foreign policy that callously destroyed untold millions throughout what was then known as the Third World. He denounced the idea that the problem with segregation was that it separated black from *white*, making the obvious but consistently elided point that the evil of segregation was that it perpetuated the separation of blackness from *value* (that began under slavery). He saw how the arguments of racial liberals (discrimination

<sup>42</sup> “Malcolm X: Arabs Send Warm Greetings to ‘Our Brothers’ of Color in U.S.A: Malcolm X Finds Africans, Arabs Fret More about Us than Selves,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 15, 1959, in *Portable*, 140.

<sup>43</sup> Thulani Davis, introduction to *Malcolm X: The Great Photographs* (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1993).

produces crime) and those of racial conservatives (blacks are congenitally disposed toward crime) shared a tendency to associate criminality with blackness. His famous, oft-told parable of the integrationist fox and the segregationist wolf illustrated how normative antiblackness could be couched in different causal arguments and political philosophies and even within alternative social agendas and still come up trumps in the end.

We now live in a period of history in which we have confusingly oscillated between the first black president of the United States, Barack Obama, elected under an inclusive and hopeful civil rights imprimatur, and a resurgent white supremacy decrying “American carnage” in the figure of Donald Trump. The values of racial diversity are still trumpeted throughout universities, corporations, and the military even though a reactionary, color-blind jurisprudence has solidified its stranglehold over the idea of racial fairness, making redressing racial inequality via protection of voting rights and antidiscrimination principles ever more difficult. Criminal punishment remains colored by the logic of arbitrary force and racial disproportionality. The threshold for cruel and unusual punishment moved to the bare maintenance of human aliveness under personality-destroying conditions of solitary confinement, in a period in which the torture of criminal (or terrorist) suspects became routine at home and abroad. The United States with 5 percent of the world’s population continues to hold 25 percent of its prisoners, the majority poor black and brown men and women—and felon disfranchisement is a means to permanently truncate the political rights of the racialized poor. The call to say “Black Lives Matter” has emerged as a forceful response to the fact that an expansive US state violence in the world, in the city, and at the border finds its analogue in enhanced capacities for private violence within the commonwealth’s injunction to “stand your ground,” or in the now routine incidences of random shooters whose possession of military-grade weapons is protected under the Constitution. Living finally in a moment when sustainable conditions for a planet shared in common are undermined by the accelerated bunkering of wealth and power, we could do worse than recall the remorseless indictment of racial cruelty offered by Malcolm X.

As the great political theorist Judith Shklar famously argued, “putting cruelty first” is not only the most exacting of philosophical stances, but it is also “a matter very different from mere humanness. . . . It dooms one to a life of skepticism, indecision, disgust and often misanthropy.” There is great accuracy in this description when we consider Malcolm X, but it only partially captures his significance. As Malcolm put it a few months before his death: “We can never have peace and security as long as one black man in this country is being bitten by a police dog. No one in the country has peace and security.”<sup>44</sup> Putting *racial* cruelty first—indeed arguing for the intimate connections between racism and cruelty—Malcolm X

44 “Founding Rally of the OAAU,” June 1964.

did not ultimately succumb to Sklar's limiting opposition between a humiliating sternness ("hating cruelty cruelly") and sentimental solicitude ("the power of pity"), though these elements are not altogether absent from his discourse and practice.<sup>45</sup> Instead, with both his words and how he embodied his words, he focused attention on the difficult challenge of thinking about what had been stolen—and continued to be stolen—that could never be recovered. In doing so he illuminated the immeasurable contributions that the "cruel and unusual" history of the US racial order made to undoing public trust, eroding common purpose, and obscuring shared vulnerability, to the detriment of the great majority of people at home and at the ends of the earth.

45 Judith Sklar, "Putting Cruelty First," in *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 8, 21, 35. For an example of Malcolm X "hating cruelty cruelly," see "The Ballot or the Bullet" (April 1964): "There's a new deal coming in. There's new thinking coming in. It'll be Molotov cocktails this month, hand grenades next month. It'll be ballots, or it'll be bullets. It'll be liberty or it will be death. The only difference about this kind of death—it'll be reciprocal." There is, of course, also a citational history to this speech extending back to Frederick Douglass and the radical abolitionists that is sometimes forgotten: "If speech alone could have abolished slavery, the work would have been done long ago. What we want is an anti-slavery government, in harmony with our anti-slavery speech, one which will give effect to our words, and translate them into acts. For this, the ballot is needed, and if this will not be heard and heeded, then the bullet."

## 23: Martin Luther King Strategist of Force

David L. Chappell

### Introduction

Martin Luther King sought to cultivate a distinct public philosophy among his fellow Americans. He presented this philosophy as the most practical way to understand—and to use—the power of black Americans and other oppressed minorities. At the heart of it was an insistence that means and ends must cohere: violent, undisciplined action by a small number of activists could not move America toward a stable order in which black folk could enjoy the social peace of freedom and equality. Mass use of nonviolent force, as King defined it, was a far more effective way to right historic wrongs—indeed a more radical and militant way—than the available alternatives. Since there was broad agreement on the ends that black Americans sought, King’s thinking focused on means—which was where disagreements and misunderstandings arose. King’s nonviolence did not rely on appeals to any inherent goodness or generosity in powerful white people, as superficial fans and critics tend to assume. Rather it aimed to coerce them to give up privileges against their will.

King was often willfully misunderstood in his lifetime and remains widely misunderstood today. King’s critics seized on his word *nonviolence*. Conservatives, like George Schuyler and Strom Thurmond, focused on the violence that broke out wherever King made the news with nonviolent rhetoric. Under a headline announcing that King’s assassination was his “Own Doing,” Schuyler wrote that “abrasive tactics” just provoke “irritation and ill will” and that “‘militant nonviolence’ always ends violently.”<sup>1</sup> Senator Thurmond echoed that line—a central

<sup>1</sup> For complete documentation of this chapter, see <http://www.ou.edu/cas/history/people/faculty/david-chappell>. Schuyler’s reaction to the King assassination in 1968 appeared in William Loeb’s Manchester (NH) *Union Leader* (April 6) on the front page, and in the *Chicago American* (April 8), the *Nashville Banner* (April 10), and *Human Events* (April 20) under various titles. Schuyler focused on King’s rabble-rousing methods: there were “too many retardate, half-witted, criminally inclined people in our population whose expectations have to be kept in check.” He also emphasized King’s reliance on left-wing advisers, saying that the dispute in Memphis should have been handled by AFL-CIO professionals and local employers, “not by demagogic outsiders with appeals to racial passion.” On Schuyler’s earliest years, see Jeffrey Ferguson, *The Sage of Sugar Hill* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005). For later years, Alex Bain, “Shocks Americana: George Schuyler Serializes Black Internationalism,” *American Literary History*, September 14, 2007, 937–63; Oscar R. Williams, *George S. Schuyler: Portrait of a Black Conservative* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007); and Harry McKinley Williams, “When Black Is Right: The Life and Writings of George S. Schuyler” (PhD diss., Brown University, 1988).

theme in segregationist responses to nonviolent protest—a few days later, as did California governor Ronald Reagan.<sup>2</sup> To conservatives King was a hypocrite, or at best an irresponsible troublemaker who could not restrain the destructive passions he stirred up. Militant critics, from the separatist Malcolm X to internationalists like Robert F. Williams, Stokely Carmichael, and Eldridge Cleaver, said nonviolence was demoralizing and ineffectual at best, restraining black Americans and stifling their natural responses to oppression. As Malcolm influentially put it, King was one of America's "twentieth century religious uncle toms," a "chump, not a champ," who lured thousands into a grandiose "farce on Washington" in 1963 with his "turn-the-other-cheek cowardly philosophy."<sup>3</sup> The Black Panthers' minister of information, Eldridge Cleaver, held up the martyred Malcolm, along with exiles like Robert Williams and W. E. B. Du Bois, as heroes—in contrast to King, who wore his Nobel Prize as a golden badge of white approval. The comparison illustrated "the historical fact that the only Negro Americans allowed to attain national or international fame have been puppets or lackeys of the white power structure—and entertainers and athletes." Cleaver greeted King's death as inevitable, saying that King's "self-deceiving doctrine" of nonviolence had long been a "stumbling block."<sup>4</sup> The core belief of King's "militant" opponents was

2 Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia went further than any other conservative on the floor of Congress in suggesting that King had it coming: King "usually spoke of nonviolence; yet violence all too often attended his actions. . . . One cannot preach nonviolence and, at the same time, advocate defiance of the law. . . . For to defy law is to invite violence, especially in a tense atmosphere." Byrd in *Congressional Record-Senate*, April 5, 1968, 9138–40. Thurmond was somewhat more oblique. King's death and the riots that broke out in response to it "sprang from the same source," Thurmond said: "the philosophy that one need only obey the laws that please him." Thurmond in *Congressional Record-Senate*, April 5, 1968, 9226. For variations on the theme, see, Thomas R. Waring, *Charleston News & Courier*, April 6, 1968, and Ronald Reagan, quoted in *New York Times*, April 4, 1968. On segregationist views of King, see David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), chaps. 6–8, and David L. Chappell, *Waking from the Dream: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Shadow of Martin Luther King* (New York: Random House, 2014), chap. 1.

3 Uncle Tom, cowardly, and farce: Malcolm X, "20 Million People in a Political, Economic, and Mental Prison," January 23, 1963, in *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*, ed. Bruce Perry (London: Owen, 1969), 40, 76. Chump in Arthur Magida, *Prophet of Rage* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 87. Also see Malcolm on Gandhi in *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove, 1965), 269. Louis Lomax, who revered Malcolm and had worked with him, wrote insightfully about Malcolm's dishonest claim that King's nonviolence translated into a command not to respond to vigilante or criminal attacks. Lomax, *To Kill a Black Man* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1968). See below on Robert F. Williams. Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton echoed Williams and Malcolm in their 1967 manifesto *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967), 50. For developments of the theme, see Alex Haley, epilogue to *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 431, 438–39, 455, 465, 435–36; Huey P. Newton with J. Herman Blake, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 110; Malcolm quoted in Stephen Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: Life of Martin Luther King* (New York: Harper, 1982), 244–45; C. Eric Lincoln, *Black Muslims in America* (1961; rev. ed., Boston: Beacon, 1973), 146; Malcolm X, interview with Kenneth Clark, 1963, in Clark, *The Negro Protest* (Boston: Beacon, 1963), 26–29; Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 116, 131.

4 Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), 79, 108; Cleaver, "The Death of Martin Luther King: Requiem for Nonviolence," *Ramparts*, May 1968, 48–49. One wonders here about

that only defensive violence would deter the offensive violence that had long defined life in cotton field and ghetto.

The conservative criticism of King's nonviolence has been forgotten. The militant one has shaped memories of the movement that King tried for twelve-odd years to lead. Both criticisms serve as reminders that during his lifetime King was one of the most controversial figures in American history—all across the middle as well as at the outer limits of public opinion. Both criticisms involve rather obvious misconstruals of King's work. But they highlight the historical reality that nonviolent social change provokes as much anger and disappointment as violent social change does, and thus as much incomprehension.

King's public philosophy—a philosophy of action, which might better be called a strategy, since it focused on means more than ends—had nonviolence at its core. His enemies and rivals got that right. He preached and practiced nonviolence to rare effect in world history. Only Gandhi rivals King in that field, unless one counts Jesus of Nazareth. That martyrs grow less controversial after they die is a cliché. The challenge is to rediscover and understand the special kind of nonviolence that King's white and black critics obscured. Well-meaning admirers, to the present day, tend to overlook or underestimate King's development of methods that were politically effective, not just morally clean. His admirers also tend to emphasize King's dream of a distant peaceful future. King, by contrast, emphasized plans for action today and the next day and the next—"now is the time"—along with the discipline and training that effective mass action required. Nonviolence did distinguish King's words and the events he has come to symbolize. But not in the way people suppose it did.<sup>5</sup>

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the celebrity and huge white followings that Cleaver and Huey Newton, among other Panthers, had. But also see Cleaver, interview by Nat Hentoff in *Playboy*, October 1968, repr. in *Eldridge Cleaver: Post-prison Writings and Speeches*, ed. Robert Scheer (New York: Vintage, 1969), 197–98, and Stanford speech, October 1968, in *Eldridge Cleaver: Post-prison Writings and Speeches*, 137–38; Harvey Swados, "Old Con, Black Panther, Brilliant Writer, and Quintessential American," *New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 1969; Randal Maurice Jelks, *Faith and Struggle in the Lives of Four African Americans: Ethel Waters, Mary Lou Williams, Eldridge Cleaver, and Muhammad Ali* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); and Cleaver's own conversion narrative from a decade later, *Soul on Fire* (Waco: World, 1978), which was as riveting a read for evangelical Protestants in the 1970s and 1980s as *Soul on Ice* was in its time for vicarious revolutionaries. It is hard to find a soul who has read both books. On the practice—as opposed to the rhetoric—of violence among Black Panthers, the following suggest in different ways that much of it was directed inward, at fellow black revolutionaries, rather than at the police or other parts of the power structure: Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Pantheon, 1992); Hugh Pearson, *Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power* (New York: DaCapo, 1995); and Paul Bass and Douglas Rae, *Murder in the Model City: The Black Panthers, Yale, and the Redemption of a Killer* (New York: Basic, 2006). More sanguine views of violent rhetoric in the period include Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999), and Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Much of the published work on King springs from the assumption that he was one of history's famous leaders who hogged the trough of media coverage and textbook attention at the

## Preparation and Major Struggles

Born in 1929, King grew up in segregated Atlanta in a relatively privileged middle-class home. "This is not to say that I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth," he wrote in an autobiographical essay for a divinity school class in 1950. "I could never get out of my mind the economic insecurity of many of my playmates and the tragic poverty of those living around me," he added in his first book in 1958. He recalled that in his teens he "saw economic injustice first hand, and realized that the poor white was exploited just as much as the Negro."<sup>6</sup>

His father, Martin Luther King Sr., had driven himself hard to escape the rural poverty he hated, taking elementary English as an adult. King Sr. married Alberta Williams, an inspiring musical leader. She was the daughter of the Rev. A. D. Williams, who needed an ambitious successor. King Sr. took over and expanded his father-in-law's Ebenezer Baptist Church and was soon known as the highest paid Negro preacher in Atlanta.<sup>7</sup> King Jr. marveled that nobody attacked

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expense of the grassroots activists who actually made society change. Even before King died, academic writers tended to minimize his significance. Many dismissed or underplayed King's ideas, along with other activists' specialized ideas about nonviolent strategy: Joseph R. Washington, *Black Religion: Negro Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 1964); August Meier, "The Conservative Militant," in *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile*, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970); Emily Stoper, *SNCC: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1989). The best works on King's ideas—John Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982); Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986); Warren Steinkraus, "Martin Luther King's Personalism and Nonviolence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34 (January-March 1973): 97–110—are among the least cited works in the scholarship on civil rights. Scholars discovered that King got a great deal of assistance from ghostwriters (including Harris Wofford and Stanley Levison). See David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), and Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *Papers of Martin Luther King*, 7 vols. to date (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992–), hereafter *PMLK*. Revelations in 1990 of King's extensive plagiarism added to the difficulty of attributing ideas to King. A widespread antihero-worship—the ivory tower's unrequited infatuation with the grassroots—has perhaps overcompensated for the public's alleged tendency to lionize King. It has at any rate occluded much of King's role in symbolizing and representing what was unique about the movement's successful efforts to put ideas into action during his lifetime. Even the best, most thorough biography—Garrow's Pulitzer-winning *Bearing the Cross*—ends with a page of quotations from other prominent activists who warn against "idolizing" and "exalting" King. Garrow's point is that the subject of his long, dense book was really only a secondary or contributing cause, at best, of the historic changes brought about by grassroots activists on which academic attention has almost exclusively focused since the 1970s. On the plagiarism, see source notes in Chappell, *Waking from the Dream*, chap. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Silver spoon: King, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," in *PMLK* 1:360. Tragic poverty and the "poor white": King, *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper, 1958), hereafter *STF*, 90.

<sup>7</sup> M. L. King Sr. was known at birth as Michael L. King but gradually started calling himself Martin Luther King, esp. after a trip to Europe in 1934. His son was also named Michael, called Mike as a child. But like his father, young Mike began calling himself Martin Luther. Martin



his father, who rode a “whites only” elevator at city hall to register to vote and helped lead the Atlanta Civic and Political League and the city’s NAACP. At a rally at Ebenezer, Daddy King shouted, “I’ll never stop off the road again to let white folks pass.”<sup>8</sup> King Jr. remembered a policeman pulling his father over and calling him “boy.” King Sr. pointed to his son and said, “This is a boy. I’m a man, and until you call me one, I will not listen to you.”<sup>9</sup> King feared for his father but also feared him. “Whippings must not be so bad,” he later joked, “for I received them until I was fifteen.”<sup>10</sup> King’s grandmother Jennie Williams had a special, protective love for him. She died suddenly in 1941, when King Jr. was eleven. His father recalled, “M. L. thought God was punishing the family” for the “sin” of his skipping his homework. “He cried off and on for several days afterward, and was unable to sleep at night.” Daddy King did not mention that M. L. also jumped out of a second-floor window in a possible suicide attempt.<sup>11</sup>

King Jr. (born Michael, like his father) skipped two grades and entered Morehouse College at fifteen. He quit his job at the Atlanta Railway Express Company at seventeen when a foreman called him “nigger.” He got the call to preach that year. He stopped dating girls and going to dances for a time. His wife later explained, “I think he felt he had to purge himself,” since ministers have to be models. By the time she met him, however, he was “warm and fun-loving, with a delight in other people.”<sup>12</sup> He got mediocre grades at historically black Morehouse but still drew the attention and recommendation of Morehouse’s renowned president Benjamin Mays. He was admitted to Crozer Theological Seminary in 1948. He got very good grades at Crozer, where he was the first black senior-class president, and at Boston University, where he got a PhD in 1955.<sup>13</sup> He said he wanted to be a scholar. But he also had a gift for preaching and landed a high-paying job at a “big folks’ church,” Dexter Avenue Baptist in Montgomery, in 1955.<sup>14</sup> Visitors

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Luther King Sr. with Clayton Riley, *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), 26; editors’ introduction to *PMLK*, 1:21 n.63, 30–31 n.98.

8 Introduction to *PMLK*, 1:33.

9 King Jr. recalled that the cop “wrote the ticket up nervously, and left the scene as quickly as possible.” Introduction to *PMLK*, 1:33.

10 King jokes about being beaten, quoted in Garrow, *Bearing*, 34.

11 Jumped from window, Intro. to *PMLK*, 1:34; crying over Jennie Williams’s death, King Sr., *Daddy King*, 109.

12 Quit job: *PMLK*, 1:85; Morehouse at fifteen, call to preach, dating, dances, “purge . . . fun-loving”: Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Avon, 1969), 98–99.

13 On King’s grades: C. S. King, *My Life*, 100; Garrow in *Washington Post*, November 18, 1990. Letters from Mays and others concerning King’s grades at Morehouse are in *PMLK*, 1:151–57. Mays’s recommendation of King to Crozer, *PMLK*, 1:152–53. The editors of King’s papers detail his academic record at Crozer and BU, paper by paper, in *PMLK*, vols. 1–2. See also Randal Maurice Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays: Schoolmaster of the Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

14 King calls Dexter “big folks’ church” with a reputation as “a sort of silk-stocking church catering only to a certain class,” in *STF*, 25.

to this day are shocked to see that King's first pulpit stands next to the Alabama state capitol complex, which includes the governor's office, with nothing but lawn and an intersection between the two historic symbols. Montgomery was the first capital of the Confederacy.

There King's public career began when Rosa Parks and a few other activists in Montgomery launched what became a year-long nonviolent siege in December 1955, just four months after he and Coretta King moved there. King did not seek the job of world-historical leader. Veteran black leaders chose King to head the boycott organization, the Montgomery Improvement Association, because he was such an effective speaker and because he had not been in town long enough to have many enemies. He was twenty-six.

King spoke to a crowd of twenty-five thousand at the Lincoln Memorial at a national Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in 1957. With the leaders of other boycotts from Tallahassee and Baton Rouge, King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that year. He began speaking about nonviolent action all over the country. He traveled to India. He played a relatively minor role in the sit-ins of 1960 and the Freedom Rides of 1961, which both dramatized southern racism with small groups of nonviolent protesters. He led the national and international news in demonstrations he helped organize in Albany, Georgia (1962); Birmingham, Alabama (1963); St. Augustine, Florida (1964); and Selma, Alabama (1965). He spoke again at the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963, this time to a record quarter of a million. There he gave his most famous speech, remembered by its "I have a dream" refrain. He won the Nobel Peace Prize the following year, though FBI director J. Edgar Hoover tried to discourage him from accepting it and tried to discredit him by spreading true and false information about his personal life.

A constitutional amendment and historic civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, inspired by the campaigns King spoke for, dismantled legal disfranchisement and banned discrimination in employment and public accommodations. The distinctiveness of southern racism diminished. Unrest in northern and western cities helped shift King's attention away from the South. In 1967 and 1968 he prepared to launch a new series of nonviolent demonstrations aimed at alleviating the plight of the poor of all races. Poor black sanitation workers, on strike for their rights, respect, and decent working conditions in Memphis, called him home to the South. The civil rights movement was already losing focus and momentum when an assassin's bullet ended his life there in April 1968.

At the center of King's theory and practice is an evolving argument to define nonviolence for the modern world. King argued against the conservatives who painted it as a cynical or irresponsible form of politics. He also argued against impatient rivals and sympathizers who saw nonviolence as an insufficiently realistic, inadequately forceful, overly optimistic, hat-in-hand appeal to the good nature

of powerful white people. As King conceived nonviolence, however, it involved as much coercion as negotiation. In the major confrontations at Montgomery, Albany, Birmingham, St. Augustine, and Selma, King relied no more exclusively on diplomacy and rhetoric than military leaders do at the beginnings and ends of wars. The battles at Birmingham and Selma were especially important since they exploited media attention on local violence and on King's uplifting rhetoric. The dogs and firehoses dramatically exposed the unruly extremism that inhered in maintenance of southern "order." That attention in turn helped put sufficient pressure on Congress and the White House to enact the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The 1964 act strengthened the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal protection of the laws by banning unequal treatment in employment and public accommodations. It appeared to commit the power of the federal government to enforcement of its provisions. The 1965 act further strengthened the Fourteenth Amendment and restored the Fifteenth Amendment's ban on racial discrimination in voting, which had been undone by a series of state disfranchisement laws around the turn of the twentieth century. Along with the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, ratified in January 1964, which banned poll taxes in national elections, the 1965 act ended the system of legal disfranchisement. The Second Reconstruction is recognized above all in these two laws, restoring the law of the First Reconstruction (embodied in the Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1870, 1871, and 1875, as well as the 13th–15th Amendments).

The value of nonviolence as a form of persuasive political theater has been widely discussed: peaceful victims, sometimes at prayer, gain sympathy when attacked by ruthless mobs, police dogs, and firehoses. But King's idea was not merely to raise consciousness about racism and generate sympathy for its victims. He and his fellow activists disrupted society in order to change its political priorities. They pressured an unwilling Congress and White House to act where none had acted since the 1870s. They were taking the initiative and setting the priorities, not just expressing dissent. Nonviolent resistance to evil, which King called "active resistance" as distinct from merely "passive resistance," was playing offense, not defense.

Black Panthers and other militant voices among King's contemporaries confused the issue, perhaps deliberately, by emphasizing the ancient common-law right, and well-established American tradition, of armed self-defense. The Panthers' official name was Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Similar organizations clamored for an alternative to mass nonviolence, such as the Deacons for Defense in Louisiana. King had spoken about police brutality as one of the most outrageous manifestations of the racist system. But he did more to provoke it than to deter it.

All King wanted to achieve, he felt an overriding imperative to achieve nonvi-

olently. From the beginning of his career, he had a radical Christian egalitarian agenda, deeply critical of capitalism, focused on poverty and class as well as on racism. He shared that agenda with many others but stood apart in two ways: in his insistence that mass nonviolent action was the most practical means to act on the common agenda, and in his ability to popularize such action and thus make it politically effective on a massive scale.

King also believed that nonviolence was morally imperative, that an other-worldly God commanded it even in cases where it would be impractical. But he argued that the method appealed to far more poor black Americans than violence did, and that they adhered to the method because it was practical—largely because alternatives to it were either ineffectual or counterproductive. He and his closest followers made it clear that his success was incomplete—as the success of every known violent revolutionary on the one hand and every temporizing reformer on the other has been incomplete. Nonetheless his success—or rather the success he has come to symbolize—has been extraordinary by historical standards. It demands the closest attention.

### **The Strategy of Nonviolent Force**

In the autobiographical chapter of his first book, King wrote that he ended his formal education with all his influences converging into a “positive social philosophy.” “One of the main tenets of this philosophy was the conviction that nonviolent resistance was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their quest for social justice.” He named no other tenet.<sup>15</sup>

King’s form of nonviolence was many things in theory, and even more in practice. King often clarified his meaning of nonviolence by coupling it to other words that were necessary to complete the thought: “nonviolent resistance” and “nonviolent direct action” defined his focus. These terms refer almost always to mobilization of large numbers of protesters, as in “mass nonviolent resistance” and “mass direct action.” They add up to a general method King called “practical nonviolence,” as distinct from any self-purifying or symbolic *auto da fé*. Self-purification and symbolism were important but incomplete and not always necessary parts of the process. The culmination was “active” resistance. “The phrase ‘passive resistance,’” by contrast, “often gives the false impression that this is a do-nothing method.”<sup>16</sup> In a long, tangled Christian pacifist tradition, King distanced himself from “non-resistance,” that extreme renunciation of interest in this-worldly consequences, often called Tolstoyan after the great Russian novelist, philosopher of history, and mystic. Leo Tolstoy drew his over-

<sup>15</sup> *STF*, 101.

<sup>16</sup> All quotations and paraphrases in this paragraph are from *STF*, 102.

riding influence from Jesus's counsel to turn the other cheek—moral dilemmas be damned.<sup>17</sup>

King traced his distinct development of nonviolent theory by naming debts to intellectual forebears. He went through highlights from Henry David Thoreau, Walter Rauschenbusch, Karl Marx. Then came the false dawn of a brand of non-violence he heard directly from A. J. Muste, when King was a divinity student at Crozer Theological Seminary. Muste left him “far from convinced of the practicability of his position. . . . I felt that while war could never be a positive or absolute good, it could serve as a negative good in the sense of preventing the spread and growth of an evil force. War, horrible as it is, might be preferable to surrender to a totalitarian system—Nazi, Fascist, or Communist.”<sup>18</sup> King gave Nietzsche some credit for helping to shake his faith in “the power of love in solving social problems.”

17 See Leo Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, trans. Constantine Popoff (New York: Gottsberger, 1885). For example, Tolstoy seemed to suggest that pure Christians will even accept enslavement to remain true to the Gospels.

I know that my enemies, the so-called wicked men of the world—robbers, etc.—are men, and are the “sons of men”; that they, like me, bear love for goodness and hatred of evil innate in them; that they live, as I do, on the eve of death, and, like me, can only be saved by fulfilling the doctrine of Christ. If the truth is unknown to them, and they do evil, my knowing the truth makes it my duty to reveal it to those who do not know it. I cannot do so otherwise than by refusing to take any part in evil, and by confessing the truth by my deeds. You say if enemies, such as Germans, Turks, or savages, come to attack you, and if you do not make war, they will kill you all. This is an error. If there were a society of Christians who did no evil to anybody, and who gave the surplus of their labor to others, no enemies, either Germans, Turks, or savages, would torture or kill them. They would take what these Christians (for whom there would exist no difference between Germans, Turks, or savages) would give up to them. . . . [You may also suppose that] if the family of a Christian is assaulted, not by foreign enemies, but by wicked men in his own country, if he does not defend himself, he and his family will be robbed, tortured, and killed. This is an error, again. If all the members of a family were Christians, and gave up their lives to the service of others, not one man would despoil them or kill them. Mikluha Mackli settled among a most brutal tribe of savages and was not murdered by them; they learned to love him, and submitted to him, because he did not require anything of them, but did as much good to them as he could. (*What I Believe*, 85)

As will be clear below, this is as different from King's theory and practice of nonviolence as mass murder is.

18 *STF*, 94–95. In a letter King criticized Muste: “A position of absolute pacifism allows no grounds for . . . a police force, since there is no real difference . . . between war and police action. [The U.S. was still in the Korean War, officially a ‘police action.’] Their position logically results in anarchy. . . . The[y] believe that if we just assume that the enemy will react favorably he will. They isolate war from other ethical problems. . . . It seems to me that we must recognize the presence of sin in man and that . . . since man is so often sinful there must be some coercion to keep one man from injuring his fellows. This is just as true between nations as it is between individuals. If one nation oppresses another, a Christian nation must, in order to express love of neighbor, help protect the oppressed.” King to Kenneth Smith (his professor at Crozer), spring 1951, in *PMLK*, 1:433–35.

The next breakthrough came from Mordecai Johnson, perhaps the most influential African-American Gandhian of the mid-twentieth century. King traveled from Crozer (then in Chester, Pennsylvania) to hear Johnson, just returned from India, speak in nearby Philadelphia. Here King found a different species of non-violence altogether. The effect was “electrifying.” King went out and “bought a half-dozen books on Gandhi’s life and works.” He came to see that Gandhi’s “non-violent resistance . . . was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom. But my intellectual odyssey to nonviolence did not end here.”<sup>19</sup>

The climax of King’s odyssey came in his confrontation with the Christian ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr, whose book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (published in 1932, when Niebuhr was still a socialist) tried to show American liberals a path away from their untethered faith in human progress. Niebuhr tried to bring Americans back into touch with a war-ravaged and disillusioned Continent, and perhaps unto a sober and mature view of themselves. King says that for a time he came close to “accepting uncritically everything [Niebuhr] wrote.”<sup>20</sup> With what we might call dialectical license, King then suppresses some key elements of Niebuhr’s message: for example, that Niebuhr distinguishes Gandhi’s nonviolence from the idealistic “pacifism” that he and King both came to deplore, and Niebuhr’s related prediction that the American Negro—not the industrial proletariat—will be the population to lead America to radical social change,

19 Mordecai Johnson and Gandhi, *STF*, 97. Though King may not have realized it, Johnson was channeling a whole intellectual community’s work to King’s ears. Historian Dennis C. Dickerson has uncovered the range and depth of that community’s experiments with nonviolence and its promotion of the technique in the 1930s–40s. See especially Dickerson’s pioneering “African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930–55,” *Church History* 74 (2005): 217–35. Dickerson carefully traces the growth of a core of African American Gandhians from the early 1930s on. Many of them trained the activist preachers who became famous later, in the Montgomery-to-Selma battle sequence of the 1950s–60s. The core developed around Mordecai Johnson and Howard Thurman at Howard University in Washington, DC, and around Benjamin Mays (who left Howard’s divinity school to become president of Morehouse College by the time King got there) and George Kelsey at Morehouse College, in Atlanta. They helped spread experimentation with nonviolent action to A. Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and FOR’s spinoff, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). William Stuart Nelson (Mays’s successor at Howard Divinity School) compiled some of those writers’ best work and traveled widely to spread the word. See Nelson, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations* (New York: Harper, 1948); James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985); Walter Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds., *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman* (Boston: Beacon, 1998). Randal Jelks, particularly in his great intellectual biography of Benjamin Mays, carries Dickerson’s initiative forward. See Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays, Schoolmaster of the Movement*, cited in n13. Other scholars who follow Dickerson’s lead include Anthony C. Siracusa, “From Pacifism to Resistance: the Evolution of Nonviolence in Wartime America,” *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 3 (2017): 55–77; and Victoria Woolcott, “Radical Nonviolence, Interracial Utopias, and the Congress of Racial Equality in the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Civil and Human Rights* 4 (2018): 31–61.

20 On Niebuhr, *STF*, 97–99, 102–4.

and that this same Negro will be uniquely placed to demonstrate the power of Gandhian, that is to say coercive, nonviolence. King understated Niebuhr's appeal: "Niebuhr's great contribution . . . is that he has refuted the false optimism characteristic of a great segment of Protestant liberalism. . . . Niebuhr's thinking helped me to recognize the illusions of a superficial optimism concerning human nature and the dangers of a false idealism." King still believed in "man's potential for good"—as Niebuhr did—but emphasized that "Niebuhr made me realize his potential for evil . . . and helped me to recognize the complexity of man's social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil. Many pacifists, I felt, failed to see this."<sup>21</sup>

That is the razor's edge that enabled King to differentiate his brand of non-violent action from pacifism in general and nonresistance in particular. Of pacifists King observed that "all too many had an unwarranted optimism concerning man and leaned unconsciously towards self-righteousness. It was my revolt against these attitudes under the influence of Niebuhr that accounts for the fact that in spite of my strong leaning toward pacifism, I never joined a pacifist organization."<sup>22</sup>

In striving to reconcile his understanding of Niebuhr's realism about human nature with the Gandhian method, King embraced Niebuhr's idea that, as King paraphrased it, "there was no intrinsic moral difference between violent and nonviolent resistance."<sup>23</sup> Pacifists' self-righteousness came from their feeling of moral purity. But after reading Niebuhr, King "came to see the pacifist position not as sinless but as the lesser evil in the circumstances. I felt then, and I feel now, that the pacifist would have a greater appeal if he did not claim to be free from the moral dilemmas that the Christian nonpacifist confronts."<sup>24</sup> These dilemmas concerned above all the terrifying need to use force to free slaves, defend the defenseless, or halt the expansion of mass-murdering regimes.<sup>25</sup>

King wanted to bear prophetic Christian witness, but he also wanted to make religion real in the lives of human beings. He sought to halt the spread of social sins like segregation. Actions in this world and results in this lifetime mattered. He rejected all counsel to patience and liberalism's optimistic faith in gradualism and incremental reform. He emphasized the *agraha* (usually translated as "force") as much as the *satya* (truth) in Gandhi's famous word.

In the Montgomery boycott in 1955–56, for example, King helped to mobilize people to compel the bus company and the city government to make concessions—

21 STF, 99. King tries to distance himself from Niebuhr a little here, too. But in the attempt, King evidently failed to notice or recall that his own embrace of Gandhi's "courageous confrontation of evil" and his own agreement with Gandhi's rejection of "nonresistance" closely resembles Niebuhr's position on Gandhi. King departs a bit from Niebuhr's terminology but identifies no substantive difference of opinion with Niebuhr on Gandhi or on nonviolence.

22 STF, 99.

23 STF, 98.

24 STF, 99.

25 STF, 98, 95; PMLK, 1:433–35; PMLK, 3:207–8; PMLK, 4:295.

to give up significant privileges and a measure of control—against their will. Kicking off the first meeting of what would turn out to be a year-long siege, King told the crowd, “We must keep God in the forefront.” Then he narrowed the focus: “Almighty God himself is not the only, not the, not the God just standing out saying through Hosea, ‘I love you Israel.’ He’s also the God who stands up before the nations and said: ‘Be still and know that I’m God (Yeah), that if you don’t obey me I will break the backbone of your power (Yeah) and slap you out of the orbits of your international and national relationships.’ (That’s right) Standing beside love is always justice, and we are only using the tools of justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion, but we’ve come to see that we’ve got to use the tools of coercion.”<sup>26</sup>

King began his summary of the method he used in the Montgomery boycott by emphasizing that “nonviolent resistance is not for cowards; it does resist. If one uses this method because he is afraid or merely because he lacks the instruments of violence, he is not truly nonviolent. This is why Gandhi often said that if cowardice is the only alternative to violence, it is better to fight.”<sup>27</sup>

### Force and Persuasion

Negotiation was never far from King’s mind. He found, after initial application of force—the first three days of the boycott—that the government and bus company were willing to talk. But in their first meeting, the officials assumed that the boycott would blow over, that the protesters would back down. The city commissioner voiced his willingness to grant the boycotters’ demands (much more moderate, at that early point, than they would later become). But then the bus company’s attorney, Jack Crenshaw, rejected the commissioner’s flexibility, saying the “segregation laws” prevented any concession. As King told the story, “This put a quick end to my optimism. . . . I came to see that no one gives up his privileges without strong resistance.”<sup>28</sup> Crenshaw soon showed the true colors of the private and public institutions the movement was up against: “If we granted the Negroes these demands, they would go about boasting of a victory that they had won over the white people; and this we will not stand for.”<sup>29</sup>

26 He added, “Not only is this thing a process of education, but it is also a process of legislation.” He also said: “It is not enough for us to talk about love, love is one of the pivotal points of the Christian face, faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. (All right) Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love.” King speech at Holt St. Baptist Church, Montgomery, December 5, 1955, *PMLK* 3:73–74. King translated *agraha* as “force” and *satyagraha* as “truth-force or love force” in *STF*, 96. King’s term “soul force,” in another speech at Holt Street Baptist in 1957, and again in his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, appears to echo this. *PMLK*, 4:341–42. The *PMLK* staff helpfully trace “soul-force” to King’s source, E. Stanley Jones, who attributed the concept to Gandhi.

27 *STF*, 102.

28 *STF*, 112–13; he repeats both points again and again. See, for example, *STF*, 91, 98–99, 100, 151, 184, 197, 211.

29 Jack Crenshaw, quoted in *STF*, 112.



When Bayard Rustin came to discuss King's commitment to nonviolence with him early in the boycott, he concluded that for all King's thinking on the subject, King was not prepared for the rigors of practice. "The glorious thing is that he came to a profoundly deep understanding of nonviolence through the struggle itself." There were guns in King's house, and armed guards outside it, when Rustin got there. Rustin warned that accidental or impulsive breaches of discipline easily spin out of control. Without discipline, all was lost. Rustin explained to King that "the great masses of Indians who were followers of Gandhi did not believe in nonviolence. They believed in nonviolence as a tactic."

Rustin pressed King to see that "because the followers will seldom, in the mass, be dedicated to nonviolence in principle, . . . the leadership must be dedicated to it in principle, to keep those who believe in it as a tactic operating correctly." Rustin anticipated the panic that would follow a breakdown in nonviolent discipline: "If, in the flow and heat of battle, a leader's house is bombed, and he shoots back, that is an encouragement to his followers to pick up guns." The only way to ensure no mistakes was for King to get rid of the guns, which he did.

The point is not simply that King had to force his followers to adopt nonviolent tactics and that they only went so far as a tactical understanding. Rustin also had to talk King into a deeper commitment to nonviolence, even when it came to personal defense, as a practical way to inspire and ensure strict adherence of the troops to nonviolent tactics.<sup>30</sup> Rustin told King, "I have a feeling that you had better prepare yourself for martyrdom, because I don't see how you can make the challenge that you are making here without a very real possibility of your being murdered. I wonder if you have made your peace with that."

King said that he and Coretta had discussed the possibility long into the night: that they both could die. They said it would have been easier to accept if they had not recently had a child (their first of four, it turned out). But they had made their peace with it.

Rustin told King he had the feeling that "the Lord has laid his hands on you and that is a dangerous, dangerous thing."<sup>31</sup>

Attacks from vigilantes and police brutality followed the intransigence of the city government and bus company, including bombings of four churches, King's house, and the house of Ralph Abernathy, King's confidant and best friend, and that of Robert Graetz, a white minister to a black Lutheran church.<sup>32</sup>

From his first book forward, King rejected any Tolstoyan spin on his means

30 Rustin quoted in Stewart Burns, *To the Mountaintop: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Sacred Mission to Save America, 1955-1968* (New York: Harper-San Francisco, 2004), 82. See also Rustin, *The Reminiscences of Bayard Rustin* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street, 2003); *Down the Line: Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971); and *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters*, ed. Michael Long (San Francisco: City Lights, 2012).

31 Rustin in Burns, *To the Mountaintop*, 83.

32 Bombings of houses of Graetz, Abernathy, and King, of Abernathy's church and three other churches: *STF*, 174-76.

and his ends. King quoted the Sermon on the Mount as any minister did. He also found Jesus emphasizing other messages, however. Jesus came, King reminded his readers, to bring “not peace but a sword.” What Jesus meant here and in similar passages, King wrote, was “Whenever I come, a conflict is precipitated between the old order and the new. . . . A division sets in between justice and injustice.”<sup>33</sup> Again echoing Niebuhr’s point that there was nothing inherently virtuous about the nonviolent method, King said he recognized that the “boycott method could be used to unethical and unchristian ends.”<sup>34</sup>

This moral humility, in contrast to what he saw as the pacifist tendency to “self-righteousness,” is one of King’s psychological signatures. It is probably the source of the guilt and often exaggerated sense of responsibility that friends saw tormenting him.<sup>35</sup> He always saw a goad in segregation and other forms of evil. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” he often said. The strength of his compulsion came through when King told the TV interviewer Martin Agronsky in 1957: “I think it is just as bad to passively accept evil as it is to inflict it.”<sup>36</sup>

Persuasion was involved in King’s campaigns, including appeals to the conscience and goodwill of local and distant white people. Negotiation was supposed to begin and end every nonviolent campaign.

But talk was only one step, and not the distinguishing one. Negotiation tends to precede major wars, after all, as well as strikes and other efforts to compel an adversary to do what he could not be persuaded to do. There is a long tradition in the Christian West where King grew up of viewing military force as a last resort. Rhetoric and verbal pledges almost necessarily enable and shape the conclusion of wars.

In his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* in 1963, King answered local white clergymen who criticized King for forcing the issue there. King wrote, “In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action.” He explained

33 *STF*, 40. Other Gandhians also reminded people of the verse that follows, and balances, the Tolstoyan pacifist favorite, to love your enemy to the point of “turning the other cheek” toward your enemy who has struck your first cheek. The Bible adds: “For in so doing, thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head” (Prov. 25:2; Rom. 12:20). See also *PMLK*, 3:207–8, and n49 below. King distances himself from Tolstoy’s doctrine in *PMLK*, 4:295.

34 *STF*, 50. Cf. *STF*, 98, cited above. King makes the same point in his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, in *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Signet, 1964), hereafter *WWCW*, 94. There he noted the early attempts of authorities in Birmingham, including Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, to follow the example of Albany police chief Laurie Pritchett, who deprived the movement of good publicity by treating them gently: “Perhaps Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather nonviolent in public, as was Chief Pritchett in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of racial injustice.” *WWCW*, 94. Soon enough, Connor lost his patience and reverted to brutalizing the protesters.

35 On King’s exaggerated sense of responsibility and guilt, and the burdens it put on him, see C. S. King, *My Life*; Garrow, *Bearing*, 592–617; Burns, *To the Mountaintop*, 82–89, 125–26, 167–79, 215, 227, 345–48, 391, 394, 436.

36 Agronsky interview, in *PMLK*, 4:293.

that “Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good-faith negotiation.” Talking with business and political leaders without any means to make them act led to broken promises. “You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.”<sup>37</sup> Nonviolence as King understood the term could mean negotiation. But he parted company from conventional warriors and politicians by insisting that certain applications of nonviolence in certain circumstances could force the kinds of results that are usually sought through war.

### Long-Range Goals

King sought national power. In his second book, written in 1963, he sketched out the conventional wisdom on this: newly enfranchised black voters, increasingly in the South as well as the North, often formed the “balance of power” between rival Democratic factions or between the two major parties in close contests, including presidential elections. They had growing use of their consumer dollar as well as their sometimes organized voice in the labor force. Above all, “a broad-based legion of the deprived, white and Negro,” should be the outcome of increasingly supple alliances among political blocs with overlapping interests, especially organized labor.<sup>38</sup> But King added, “The subjective elements of political power—persistence, aggressiveness, and discipline”—focused and mobilized the force that would otherwise remain latent. The new movement, King wrote, developed these more than anything. “Political leaders are infinitely respectful toward any group that has an abundance of energy to ring doorbells, man the street corners, and escort voters to the polls. Negroes in their demonstrations and voter-

37 *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, in *WWCW*, 78–79.

38 *WWCW*, 147–49, 141–42; and see *PMLK*, 5:116–20. The “balance of power” became central to African American political thought with the publication of Henry Lee Moon, *Balance of Power: The Negro Vote* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948). On how the strategy worked out, along with the coalition building that King always advocated, see, among others, Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Commentary*, February 1965, repr. in *Down the Line: Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971), 111–19; Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: How They Succeed, Why They Fail* (New York: Random House, 1978); Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Katherine Tate, *From Protest to Politics: The New Black Voters*, enl. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Carol Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests*, enl. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). Derrick Darby offers a refreshing reminder that voting—for King and others—is about more than self-assertion and escaping oppression: “A Vindication of Voting Rights,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King*, ed. Tommie Shelby and Brandon Terry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 161–83, esp. 165–70, 179–82.

registration campaigns have been acquiring excellent training in just these tasks. They also have discipline perhaps beyond that of any other group, because it has become a condition of survival. Imagine the political power that would be generated if the million Americans who marched in 1963 also put their energy directly into the electoral process.”<sup>39</sup>

The great national victories of 1964 and 1965—the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act—demonstrated the power to convert local action into a nationwide momentum to attack deeper, more obdurate evils than segregation. The movement was in for some soul-searching and perspective.

Only by emphasizing forceful action and renouncing the idea that moral suasion was sufficient could King account for the changes that had occurred. King often lamented the complacency, fear, and passivity in his own community.<sup>40</sup> But after the Birmingham struggle in 1963, he marked a massive transformation. To illustrate the change, he made a parable of the first southern state to use poison gas for capital punishment, some twenty-five years earlier. “The first victim was a young Negro. As the pellet dropped into the container, and the gas curled upward, through the microphone came these words: ‘Save me Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis.’” King observed that “the words of this boy” were all the more heartbreaking “because they reveal the helplessness, the loneliness, and the profound despair of Negroes in that period.” There was a long way to go yet, but King thought that the quarter century that elapsed since that execution had mobilized and radicalized the masses. They were no longer waiting and reacting. “Negroes have discovered the fighting spirit, and the power, each within himself. Voluntarily facing death in many places, they have relied upon their own united ranks for strength and protection.” And a new Negro world heavyweight champion went to Birmingham to help the protesters. “Floyd Patterson came to Birmingham not as a savior, but because he felt he belonged with his people.”

Joe Louis and Floyd Patterson were as much a part of the movement’s galvanizing inspiration as Gandhi and Frederick Douglass. “At no moment . . . was Patterson more of a champion than the day he appeared, far from his comfortable home, to give heart to the plain people who were engaged in another kind of bruising combat.”<sup>41</sup> It was also, like boxing, a highly disciplined, controlled kind of combat, far less likely to kill someone than a brawl or a conventional revolution.

Looking back over a decade of action from 1967, King recalled a new “mass unity” springing up among the newly emboldened black masses. The New Negro “made . . . government write new laws.” He made the entire nation rise up “and recognize his oppression and struggle.” Echoing Frederick Douglass, as he

39 WWCW, 149.

40 For example, in *STF*, 36.

41 WWCW, 111.

often did, King stressed, "What we knew daily in the South: Freedom is not given, it is won."<sup>42</sup>

What was true of the past must be true of the future. King and his closest followers were saying in the last years of his life that his work was unfinished. It had indeed barely begun. Negroes must "unite" around programs to "eradicate the last vestiges of racial injustice," he wrote in 1967. "Structures of evil do not crumble by passive waiting." History teaches that "evil is recalcitrant and determined, and never voluntarily relinquishes its hold short of an almost fanatical resistance." He continued: "We must get rid of the false notion that there is some miraculous quality in the flow of time that inevitably heals all evils. . . . Equally fallacious is the notion that ethical appeals and persuasion alone will bring about justice. This does not mean that ethical appeals must not be made. It simply means that those appeals must be undergirded by some form of constructive coercive power."

Booker T. Washington had tried the "path of patient persuasion." While King rejected the notion that Washington was an Uncle Tom, he insisted that Washington "underestimated the structures of evil; as a consequence his philosophy of pressureless persuasion only served as a springboard for racist southerners to dive into deeper and more ruthless oppression of the Negro."<sup>43</sup>

### Short-Sighted Critics

King gave conservative critics—from George Schuyler and Joseph H. Jackson to Strom Thurmond and Ronald Reagan—a lot of fuel for their argument that King provoked violence. In his 1963 *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, addressed to white clergymen of that city, for example, King said that he intended to bring the tensions of an unjust system to the surface: "We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that . . . must be opened up with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates . . . before it can be cured."<sup>44</sup>

He expected a little heat to grow under clerical collars here. "My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But . . . I am not afraid of the word 'tension.' I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth." He and his fellow protesters needed "to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism. The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-

42 King, *Where Do We Go from Here* (Boston: Beacon, 1967), hereafter *WWGfH*, 16, 19.

43 On the insufficiency of persuasion, need for constructive coercive power: *WWGfH*, 128–29.

44 *WWCW*, 85. Same idea of bringing tensions to surface as nonviolent gadflies: *WWGfH*, 90–91.

packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.” Speaking of Birmingham’s new mayor, King went on, “I have high hope that Mr. [Albert] Boutwell will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from devotees of civil rights.”

It was a question of realism and historical honesty: “I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. . . . Privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed Niebuhr argued that moral appeals to organized groups were naive; only force or a calculation of their own interests made them change.

Another strain of criticism, drawing on Malcolm X and later Frantz Fanon, as well as vigilante traditions celebrated in American folklore and cinema, had dogged the nonviolent movement at least since May 1959. When local courts failed to convict a white man accused of attempting to rape a black woman in Monroe, North Carolina, Robert F. Williams, the head of the Union County, North Carolina, chapter of the NAACP, called upon the local Negro community to “meet violence with violence.” He added, “We cannot rely on the law. . . . If we feel that an injustice is done, we must right there and then on the spot be prepared to inflict punishment on these people.”<sup>46</sup> In September 1959 Williams published his “Can Negroes Afford to Be Pacifists?” in *Liberation*, the monthly organ of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Williams would soon publish a book, *Negroes with Guns*, which became very popular among readers who sought a sharper, more decisive confrontation.

King’s first response to Williams was to distinguish self-defense from his own political strategy. “We all realize that there will probably be some spora[d]ic violence during this period of transition, and people will naturally seek to protect their property and person, but for the Negro to privately or publicly call for retaliatory violence as a strategy during this period would be the gravest tragedy that could befall us. It would be most impractical. Many of our oppressors would be more than happy for us to turn to violence. It would give them an opportunity to wipe out many innocent Negroes under the pretense that they were inciting a riot.” If black Montgomery had resorted to violence, King said, “our protest would have ended in utter defeat. Our opponents were always disappointed when we refused to retaliate with violence. . . . The opponent always knows how to deal with violence because oppressors always control the instruments and techniques of violence.”<sup>47</sup>

45 WWCW, 79–80.

46 Robert Williams in *New York Times*, May 7, 1959. The *Times* noted that the NAACP director, Roy Wilkins, suspended Williams and repudiated what he referred to as Williams’s “pro-lynching statement.”

47 King, Address to NAACP convention, July 17, 1959, in *PMLK*, 5:248.

Four months later, King responded to Williams's article in *Liberation*, which referred to nonviolent strategy as "turn-the-other cheekism." There were three conventional approaches to violence, which King distinguished according to the field in which each was practiced. The first was "pure nonviolence, which cannot readily or easily attract large masses, for it requires extraordinary discipline and courage." The second was "violence exercised in self-defense, which all societies, from the most primitive to the most cultured and civilized, accept as moral and legal. The principle of self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed, has never been condemned, even by Gandhi, who sanctioned it for those unable to master pure nonviolence."

The only approach to violence that King opposed was the third kind, "the advocacy of violence as a tool of advancement, organized as in warfare, deliberately and consciously." That was delusional and self-destructive. King predicted that advocacy of that third sort of violence would only drive Negroes away from the struggle for change.

King stood for a fourth alternative: "The Negro people can organize socially many forms of struggle which can drive their enemies back without resort to futile and harmful violence." He gave examples: "the mass boycott, sitdown protests and strikes, sit-ins,—refusal to pay fines and bail for unjust arrests—mass marches—mass meetings—prayer pilgrimages, etc." The latter referred to the national mobilization King called for in May 1957 at the Lincoln Memorial, where some twenty-five thousand demonstrators gathered on the third anniversary of the *Brown* decision to call for federal action, including civil rights legislation.

The crucial thing for King often seemed to be that masses did not in fact respond to calls for violent initiatives. The masses evidently recognized the suicidal futility of such initiatives. The practical method was thus also the most democratic one. "There is more power in socially organized masses on the march than there is in guns in the hands of a few desperate men." Assertive nonviolence was a form of protest that the people would continue to rally to and sustain.<sup>48</sup>

King often stressed that far more black people joined the nonviolent protests than ever supported the Black Panthers or the Deacons for Defense. He also stressed that the advocates of black power tended to be vague about where and

48 Williams, "Can Negroes Afford to Be Pacifists?," *Liberation*, September 1959; King, "Social Organization of Nonviolence," *Liberation*, October 1959, in *PMLK*, 5:299–304. The *PMLK* editors helpfully cite Gandhi, "Doctrine of the Sword," August 11, 1920, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Dehli: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1965), 18:132, in which Gandhi says, "I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence I would advise violence. . . . I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she should in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless victim to her own dishonor." *PMLK*, 5:302 n.5. Williams seemed at various points to advocate armed insurrection, though he also insisted at times that he only advocated self-defense. The editors of King's papers quote Williams in note 6 rejecting offensive violence. The NAACP, however, stated that it had removed Williams from his post only because of "his call for aggressive, premeditated violence. . . . No action was taken against Mr. Williams for the advocacy of self-defense." *PMLK*, 5:302–3.

when they might ever actually take violent steps—and in fact they very rarely did. But as the media paid increasing attention to riots, and as militant voices sometimes implied that the riots constituted a widespread political rejection of nonviolence, King felt increasing pressure to emphasize the coercive, militant side of his nonviolence.<sup>49</sup>

In 1967 King wrote that urgent action was needed. “The only answer to the delay, double-dealing, tokenism and racism that we still confront is through mass nonviolent action and the ballot. At times these may seem too slow and inadequate, but they are the only real tools we have.” He honored the urgency of militants and even of rioters, their impatience, and their feeling that they had a right to be angry. Of course they had a right to be angry. He tried to impress upon them

49 Recent decades have seen a wave of celebratory scholarship on King’s allegedly more radical black rivals and critics. Probably the most influential have been Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999), and Peniel Joseph, *Waiting ‘til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt, 2006). These works bring to the surface the bases of so many mainstream scholars’ earlier impatience with (and frequent misunderstanding of) King and his ideas, and with the ideas of the broader civil rights movement that was shaped by the African American Gandhians mentioned in n19, above. Recently Brandon Terry took a step back and tried to put the conflict between King and his allegedly militant critics in perspective. See Terry’s thoughtful and informative “Requiem for a Dream: The Problem Space of Black Power,” in *To Shape a New World*, 290–324, esp. 296–97, 299–300, 308–3. Terry makes the militant critique of King explicit and tries painstakingly to organize it into a coherent and plausible structure. He also grounds it quite thoroughly in one of its earliest and most extensive sources, Robert Williams, as well as in some important later sources, especially Eldridge Cleaver, Stokely Carmichael, and Charles Hamilton. Terry pits the best arguments one can make for Williams’s hit-and-run gesture at armed struggle in Monroe, NC, against King’s more sustained effort to harness violent sentiments. Of course the sentiments were morally justified responses to repression. The question was how to channel the sentiments into a “more effective mode of coercion,” as Terry puts it. He also asks, interestingly, how they might be channeled into a more effective “aesthetic performance.” Terry’s engagement with Williams is an illuminating exercise. It provokes readers to follow Terry’s supple imagination down many of the roads that history did not take. It will be obvious that I disagree with some of Terry’s interpretations of the sources. But his engagement with some of the most attractive sources makes his account indispensable for further work on persistent and generative debates over tactics. One point bears emphasis here: like nearly all scholars who try to wrestle with King’s ideas, Terry falls into a trap that some experts call “the two-Kings model.” That refers to the notion that King was initially moderate (which may mean optimistic about the USA or capitalism; confident in the good intentions or ultimate goodness of prominent white leaders; uninterested in economic structures of poverty and class; or asking only for incremental reforms); but then, after disappointment and exposure to angrier “militants” in the mid-1960s, he was “radicalized.” In this essay and elsewhere, I try to show that the evidence weighs heavily against such assumptions of discontinuity in King’s thought and practice. King’s most militant ideas were part of his outlook since the first few months of the Montgomery Boycott in 1955–56, when his public life began, and often earlier. King’s papers show he was deeply pessimistic about human nature, nationalism, capitalism, liberalism, and normal everyday Christianity, from the first few months of the Montgomery struggle in 1955–56 or earlier, deeply aware of class differences and the crippling effects of white as well as black poverty, and unimpressed by the record of moral suasion in bringing justice. Others in the Shelby and Terry volume, *To Shape a New World*, fall into the two-Kings trap as well: see, e.g., 118, 261, 265–66, 278–79, 305–7, 322.



that they had a right to so much more than that. "Our course of action must lie neither in passively relying on persuasion nor in actively succumbing to violent rebellion, but in a higher synthesis of these two opposites while avoiding the inadequacies and ineffectiveness of both."<sup>50</sup>

In words and in action, King differentiated his form of nonviolence, which he had always called militant, from reckless, ineffectual outbursts and threats, as well as from passive or naive moderation. He stressed that effective tactics reject defense for offense, individual or small-group gestures for mass-based public action, and spontaneity for discipline and training. Those choices were often more important to him than rejecting violent for nonviolent action.

### What's Love Got to Do with It?

Throughout, he also boldly talked of love. That led to much misunderstanding. His love was not sentimental, or even aimed primarily outside the community of protesters. It was many things but perhaps most fundamentally an energizing, restorative force within and among a nonviolent army. For that army was as vulnerable to battle fatigue, shell-shock, desertions, recruiting difficulties, and fatal lapses of discipline as a conventional army was. Anger and bitterness hurt the oppressed, not their oppressors. *Love* was a word for the opposite of reckless, divisive urges. It was a shorthand for the conversion of angry individual impulses into a shared and focused energy, a process that was hard to analyze and describe precisely but, once one experienced it, impossible to forget.

Forging bonds of self-sacrifice and risk, members of a disciplined group found they were more powerful together than they had been alone. Yet no individual member lost what the others had gained. The transformation of social bonds via experiences of danger has always been one of the mysteries of human nature, though nobody knows whether it is nature or something else. Veterans and students of battle, and of team sports, have written about the sources of courage and valor—sometimes of honor and magnanimity toward enemies—in comradely life under fire since Homer. Social theorists in the last two centuries—Gustave Le Bon, Émile Durkheim, Carl Jung, Max Wertheimer, Hannah Arendt, among others—tried to describe it. King had to evoke, recall, and conjure it like a minister of the gospel—or like a general rousing his troops to attack.

In his last book King zeroed in on the moral core of his nonviolent philosophy, perhaps because the media were by then paying so much attention to angry cries for and against "Black Power." "One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites," he wrote. "Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love.

50 King, *WWGfH*, 129–30.

It was this misinterpretation that caused Nietzsche, the philosopher of the 'will to power,' to reject the Christian idea of love." The same misinterpretation "induced Christian theologians to reject Nietzsche's philosophy." King tried to humanize both love and power, to make both more accessible, less idealized. "What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic."<sup>51</sup>

Though King strove here to correct the course of modern theology and philosophy, he never had any illusion that he was remaking human nature. In this public and political use of "love," King emphasized, "it would be nonsense to urge men to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense."<sup>52</sup> He had in mind something even less intimate and self-serving than denominational solidarity, ethnic identity, class interest, or love of country. Of the three ancient Greek words that translate into the modern English *love*, King explained that his public work aimed ultimately for *agape*, a disinterested goodwill toward others in general, and strangers in particular. "Agape is not a weak, passive love."<sup>53</sup> He did not expect the oppressed Negro to become Christlike—all-forgiving and brotherly toward enemy and neighbor alike—any more than he expected the white beneficiaries of racism to.

#### **What King Shared with So Many Others and What Distinguishes Him**

King tied his insistence on nonviolent means in the civil rights movement to other historic struggles for equality and social justice. He publicly joined the protest against the war in Vietnam. Like many civil rights activists (and others who read the papers during the era of world war, decolonization, and Cold War), he had a long-standing interest in international conflict and liberation movements in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. He believed in peace and opposed war, though it is not clear whether he ever gave up his early open-mindedness on the question of justifiable wars. He is on record supporting affirmative action in its pre-Nixon (pre-*Bakke*) forms: to grant true opportunity to the Negro, America "must incorporate in its planning some compensatory consideration for the hand-

<sup>51</sup> *WWGfH*, 37. Like most popular reform and revolutionary movements, the civil rights movement did not seek simply its share of control of the existing order. "Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice," King continued. "Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love."

<sup>52</sup> *STF*, 104.

<sup>53</sup> *STF*, 104. This may seem an inadequate account of the kinds of love. C. S. Lewis addressed the inadequacy of the standard view, influenced by Whorfian psychology, that three different kinds of love were conceivable to Christians in the three ancient Greek words available to Paul of Tarsus and to the authors of the Gospels. Lewis found four kinds, adding *storge* (which he translated as affection, the sort arising in families and others thrown together involuntarily) to *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*. See Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960). I am indebted to John-Mark Hart and David Anderson for guiding me to and through the biblical work on the subject.

icaps he has inherited from the past,” he wrote in 1963. “. . . Our society has been doing something special *against* the Negro for hundreds of years. How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American life if we do not do something special *for* him now?”<sup>54</sup> He is on record, from very early in his life, as believing that poverty, class, and labor are central to any meaningful struggle for progress in general, and to any practical battle against America’s structural and ideological racism in particular.<sup>55</sup>

The point here is that he shared those commitments and conceptions with others who focused on them more and got to them first. He distinguished himself in nonviolent action against racism and, increasingly, poverty and unemployment. A special form of nonviolence is what distinguishes him as a tireless advocate, practitioner, and symbol.

King’s dream of a future day when children of slaves and children of slave-owners would all sit down and sing spirituals together was as sincere as anybody’s dreams are. He spoke of the Beloved Community, of distant goals of brotherhood—something like a kingdom of God toward which we should all yearn. It was psy-

<sup>54</sup> He continued: “If a man is entered at the starting line in a race three hundred years after another man, the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up with his fellow runner.” *WWCW*, 134. President Lyndon Johnson echoed this justification for affirmative action in his famous address on the subject at Howard University in 1965. Many years later, Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, a southern conservative Republican, changed the constitutional grounds for affirmative action from compensation for past injustices to “diversity” in the future in the landmark case *Board of Regents v. Bakke* (1978).

<sup>55</sup> See King, “The Negro Is Part of That Huge Community Who Seek New Freedom in Every Area of Life” (February 1959), in *PMLK*, 5:116–0, *WWGfH*, 132–66, 193–202; and the handy volume of King’s major statements on economic justice and coalition-building, King, *All Labor Has Dignity*, ed. Michael Honey (Boston: Beacon, 2011). Space constraints—and my focus on means rather than ends—compel me to give short shrift to King’s commitments to all the causes mentioned in this paragraph. I do not mean to trivialize them, or the other deep and unfinished struggles of the era that King’s thoughtful militancy helped to define. For more on King’s relationship to the causes I have referred to here, see—in addition to the works of biography and intellectual history cited above—the essays in Shelby and Terry, eds., *To Shape a New World*. Particularly original and insightful are the essays by Martha Nussbaum (esp. 114–123, 125), Danielle Allen, and Karuna Mantena. Essays on specific topics in the volume that are also refreshingly insightful and up to date include those by Derrick Darby on the deep significance of voting rights; by Ronald R. Sundstrom on affirmative-action litigation and the sterility of “colorblindness”; by Lionel McPherson on armed struggle for justice and international conflict (esp. 260, 262–63, though I would supplement McPherson’s account with historian Carol Anderson’s *Eyes off the Prize* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003]); and especially by Tommie Shelby on urban space and economic justice (though I would supplement Shelby’s essay with historian Matthew Lassiter’s *Silent Majority: Suburban Politics and the Sunbelt South* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006] and the legal scholar Sheryll Cashin’s *Failures of Integration* [New York: Public Affairs, 2005]). Michelle Moody-Adams makes a valiant (and it seems to me Arendtian) effort to pull all these unrequited commitments of the civil-rights protesters of King’s day together into a fundamental commitment to what she calls “conscientious citizenship” (esp. on 271, 275–79, 282, 284). Where records and memories of those commitments often sprawl beyond summary or even comprehension, her essay may prove most useful.

chologically necessary to keep such eschatological matters in mind, even if the short- and medium-term political goals could miraculously be achieved before we die. King even urged us to think, on our good days, that we could discern a “bend” over cosmological time in the “arc of the universe” toward justice. All these are elements of King’s ministry and of the social movement he shaped and came willy-nilly to symbolize.

These elements may sound naive or utopian, compared to the emphases above on coercive political realism. But King’s most arresting philosophical commitment, the one that seems to contain all the others, is that means and ends must cohere. “In the final analysis, means and ends must cohere because the end is preexistent in the means, and ultimately destructive means cannot bring about constructive ends,” he said in a sermon about fourteen weeks before he died.<sup>56</sup>

What is fascinating about this is that it takes the intellectual emphasis off ends—where political philosophers from Plato on, and would-be revolutionaries, have all too often focused. King felt a duty to spend most of his time on immediately achievable steps to social change, rather than on distant goals. Such were the demands of a mobilized mass already acting in the streets. In practice, distant goals almost always mean goals that are never achieved.

Close attention to means is a discipline, a way to come down to earth from utopian ideals—which are as likely to inspire and justify mass murder, enslavement, and colonization as they are to drive civil rights workers to collect contributions, pass out leaflets, and plan marches. To insist on nonviolent means takes so much training and planning, so much habituation, that it can be considered like a classical virtue. Nonviolent discipline seeks to shape everyday political behavior. If it works, it builds habits of individual thought and collective action. It embodies the wisdom of all the tragically thwarted revolutions and noble causes for which people have killed and maimed and died throughout history. There are things worth dying for. King’s critics said that those who died in nonviolent protest were naive, and it is true that many of their aims were thwarted, and some of their achievements have since been reversed. But to believe that anybody’s plan

<sup>56</sup> Means and ends must cohere: “Christmas Sermon on Peace,” December 24, 1967, in *A Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper, 1968). He had written earlier, in the *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, that he had been trying “to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Perhaps Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather non-violent in public, as was Chief Pritchett in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of racial injustice.” *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, in *WWCW*, 93–94. He made a similar point in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech a year and a half later: “Nonviolence seeks to redeem the spiritual and moral lag that I spoke of earlier as the chief dilemma of modern man. It seeks to secure moral ends through moral means. Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. Indeed, it is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennoble the man who wields it.” In James Melvin Washington, ed., *Testament of Hope* (New York: Harper, 1986), 224–26.

will ever be fulfilled after the shooting starts—that anybody will be able to avoid tragic disappointment in the course of violent revolution and war—is a more obvious and straightforward naïveté. Nobody said that nonviolence always works. But King’s reputation, like Gandhi’s, properly stands for the discovery that it can work, at times, against very steep odds.<sup>57</sup>

57 Readers interested in how nonviolent ideas developed later may find the following helpful: Victoria Rader, *Signal through the Flames: Mitch Snyder and America’s Homeless* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1986); Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Trafalgar, 1999); Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003); Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); and Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Nation Books, 2016). For new academic insights and discoveries, see Sharon Nepstad, *Nonviolent Struggle: Theories, Strategies, Dynamics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Kurt Schock, *Civil Resistance Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); Karuna Mantena, “Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics,” in *To Shape a New World*; and especially Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

## 24: Toni Morrison and the Fugitives' Democracy

Lawrie Balfour

*I can't wait for the ultimate liberation theory to imagine its practice and do its work.*

Toni Morrison, "Home"

### Taking Flight

In her 1997 essay "Home," Toni Morrison recounts her attempts to sketch "a world in which race did not matter." Repudiating both the wishful thinking of liberal colorblindness and the cynicism of post-civil rights era complaints that it is time to get over or beyond race, Morrison charts an alternative course. She wrestles with the difficulty of sustaining human personality and collective life in the face of the varying forms of racial subjection and terror that have defined the United States from the colonial period until the present. Even as she reckons with African American history as a history of movement (often forced, sometimes stolen, more rarely chosen), Morrison seeks contexts in which it is possible to be "both free and situated." The result is a body of literature that is born of a passionate and specific love for black people, on the one hand, and that relentlessly undercuts the lethal power of race, on the other. "Home" also charts a course for Morrison as a political thinker who eschews the luxury of waiting for "the ultimate liberation theory" and attempts to realize its ends through the creative use of language.<sup>1</sup> English, Morrison observes, has been a vehicle for both the violence of modern life and the promise of emancipation; and she strives to craft stories and sentences that cultivate that promise without enacting new forms of violence.

Morrison spent most of her life investigating how thoroughly the language of her inheritance—spoken as well as written—could be refashioned to rebut the claims of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist polity. Born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, Morrison traces her own lineage through migrant forebears whose analysis of their situation included both her grandfather's "unreconstructed black pessimis[m]" and her grandmother's capacity to discern

<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, "Home," in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 3–4.

the glimmers of “irrevocable and permanent change.”<sup>2</sup> While she is best known as the author of eleven novels and the recipient of multiple literary awards (most notably the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993), Morrison pursued the possibility of a freer, more equal world across multiple overlapping careers. She was a teacher at several universities; an editor whose deep appreciation for the importance of canon-making reconstituted American literature as a field capacious enough to encompass the novels of Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones, the poetry of Lucille Clifton and June Jordan, the autobiographies of Muhammad Ali, Huey Newton, and Angela Davis, and the words of many more artists, activists, and scholars; a prolific reviewer; and an acute literary and social critic whose commentaries go to the core of the knottiest questions of our times.

Does it do Morrison a disservice to read her as a *political* thinker? As she notes, such an interpretive choice has its risks. In the preface to a recent edition of her 1973 novel, *Sula*, Morrison recollects: “In the fifties, when I was a student, the embarrassment of being called a political writer was so acute, the fear of critical derision for channeling one’s creativity toward the state of social affairs so profound, it made me wonder: Why the panic? . . . What could be so bad about being socially astute, politically aware in literature?”<sup>3</sup> She resolves the dilemma by committing herself unapologetically to a sensibility that is “highly political *and* passionately aesthetic.”<sup>4</sup> And it is in the spirit of that resolution that I offer some reflections on her democratic thinking.

To that end, I focus on two intertwined ideas that animate Morrison’s work: responsibility and fugitivity. *Responsibility* may be among the most vexed terms in the American political lexicon. One need only think of two legislative innovations of 1996—the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act” and the “Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act”—to recognize that this term is habitually raced (and gendered and classed) and that it can be, and has been, wielded as a cudgel in the service of policing vulnerable populations.<sup>5</sup> In opposition to such usages, Morrison’s essays and fiction advance an account of democratic life that dwells on the efforts of African Americans, individually and collectively, to take responsibility for themselves. In 1971, for example, when Morrison published her reflection “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib” in the *New York Times*, she traced the connections that entangle responsibility and freedom with oppressive forms of power. The black woman, Morrison writes, “combined being a responsible person with being a female—and as a person she felt free to confront not only the world at large (the rent man, the doctor and the

2 Toni Morrison, “A Slow Walk of Trees (as Grandmother Would Say), Hopeless (as Grandfather Would Say),” in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 3–5.

3 Toni Morrison, foreword to *Sula* (New York: Vintage, 2004), xi.

4 Morrison, foreword to *Sula*, xiii (emphasis in the original).

5 Nancy Rosenblum rightly identifies the contemporary discourse of personal responsibility as a sign of “political despair.” Rosenblum, quoted in Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 40.

rest of the marketplace) but her man as well.” There is a paradox here: “In a way black women have known something of the freedom white women are now beginning to crave. But oddly, freedom is only sweet when it is won. When it is forced, it is called responsibility.”<sup>6</sup> Morrison’s thought examines that paradox directly: she defies Americans’ habit of mistaking privilege, which often engenders unfreedom, for responsibility; and she narrates the lives of women, men, and children who assert themselves in defiance of a society that has deemed them incapable of responsible action.

To grasp Morrison’s understanding of responsibility, it is critical to attend to the role of fugitives in her writing. Gathering myriad stories from the Middle Passage, escapes from slavery, and the Great Migration, and resuscitating the lives of individuals who left no account of themselves to official history, Morrison challenges readers to reckon with African American experiences of flight, displacement, exile, and home-making. She re-creates contexts where race *has* mattered and aspires to imagine “a-world-where-race-does-*not*-matter as something other than a theme park, or a failed and always-failing dream, or as the father’s house of many rooms.”<sup>7</sup> That project, she insists, requires coming to terms with movement: “The overweening, defining event of the modern world is the mass movement of raced populations, beginning with the largest forced transfer of people in the history of the world: slavery.” Among the legacies of that historical movement is a contemporary world whose “work has become policing, halting, forming policy regarding, and trying to administer the movement of people.”<sup>8</sup> And there are other legacies too.

Chief among these legacies are the examples of actual and imagined fugitives who have contested the boundaries established by successive American racial orders, and who figure centrally in Morrison’s writing. One might say that she articulates an idea of “fugitive democracy” that is critically similar to and different from Sheldon Wolin’s 1996 essay by that name. Morrison, like Wolin, recognizes the danger to collective life when survival requires the continual erection and reinforcement of boundaries. Her account of freedom is derived from “the political potentialities of ordinary citizens” and rejects the gladiatorial image of state power conjured by Hobbes and decried by Wolin.<sup>9</sup> Morrison’s work is also avowedly democratic, insofar as it pursues “that egalitarianism which places us

6 Toni Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib,” in *What Moves at the Margin*, 25.

7 Morrison, “Home,” 3 (emphasis in the original).

8 Morrison, “Home,” 10. As Wendy Brown observes, state efforts to contain or control movement in this way marks the evanescence, rather than the strength, of national sovereignty. Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2010).

9 Sheldon S. Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 31–32. Juliet Hooker contrasts Wolin’s account of fugitivity with “black fugitive thought” in *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).



all (reader, the novel's population, the narrator's voice) on the same footing."<sup>10</sup> And her essays and fiction return repeatedly to a conception of collective life that resonates deeply with Wolin's fugitive democracy:

Democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being that is conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily, but is a recurrent possibility as long as the memory of the political survives. The experience of which democracy is the witness is the realization that the political mode of existence is such that it can be, and is, periodically lost. . . . Democracy is a political moment, perhaps *the* political moment, when the political is remembered and re-created. Democracy is a rebellious moment that may assume revolutionary, destructive proportions, or may not.<sup>11</sup>

Such moments play a pivotal role in Morrison's fiction. In *Beloved*, for example, former slaves respond to Baby Suggs, an "unchurched preacher," when she calls a free community into being and enjoins her neighbors to love the flesh their white masters exploited and despised. While the community quickly disintegrates upon leaving the Clearing where Suggs preaches, that experience of commonality is remembered and conjured again when one of the members needs protection from the ghosts of the past. Morrison's writing is replete with such instances, when diverse individuals come together to oppose the ongoing power of slavery and its legacies. Her words illustrate what it means to think of democracy "as something other than a form of government."<sup>12</sup>

Surveying some of the connections between Wolin and Morrison brings to light additional features of her political thinking. Both pay attention to the practices of tending, of cultivating the habits through which individuals constitute a collective existence as equals. Both thinkers appreciate the importance of slow time for the necessary and beautiful work human beings do together.<sup>13</sup> They also insist on the political power of remembrance, and especially of remembering the disempowered. Wolin theorizes the political costs borne by a "post-mnemonic society" whose attempts at "ritual remembrance" suppress the stories of the women and men who remain, in Morrison's words, "disremembered and unaccounted for."<sup>14</sup> Morrison vivifies those stories through thickly imagined characters and references to historical events not typically recalled in conventional narratives of

10 Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (Winter 1989): 29.

11 Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 43 (emphasis in the original).

12 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 102-4, 308, 306-7, respectively.

13 Although these themes recur through Wolin's writing, I am thinking specifically of Sheldon S. Wolin, "Tending and Intending a Constitution: Bicentennial Misgivings" and "Injustice and Collective Memory," in *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1989); and "What Time Is It?" *Theory & Event* 1 (1997).

14 Wolin, "Injustice and Collective Memory," 33; Morrison, *Beloved*, 323.

US democracy. Saturating her prose with the briefest nods to the murder of Emmett Till, the East St. Louis Riot, Bacon's Rebellion, the Tulsa Riot,<sup>15</sup> and other pivotal moments, she indicates the precise ways that racialized forms of power have made the political, as Wolin defines it, so fleeting in American life.

Yet where Wolin's account of fugitivity emphasizes the vanity of democracy in the context of the late-modern administrative state and capitalist economy, Morrison's interest in the fugitive is at once more historically textured and potentially more conducive to the enactment of new democratic practices. Her work illuminates what Robert Gooding-Williams, writing about Trayvon Martin's murder, describes as the "fugitive slave mentality," whereby black citizens can be presumed to be in flight from the law and the word of white citizens goes unquestioned.<sup>16</sup> She does the political work of relating the stories of African-descended escapees, migrants, and exiles whose pursuit of independence and voyages of self-improvement are not bound up with the taking of territory and policing of borders. Noting that African American history has been a history of taking leave and looking for home,<sup>17</sup> Morrison rekindles the spirit of women like her grandmother, "Ardelia Willis, who sneaked her seven children out of the Sack window into the darkness, rather than permit the patron of their sharecropper's existence to become their executioner as well. . . . It was Ardelia who told her husband that they could not stay in the Kentucky town they ended up in because the teacher didn't know long division."<sup>18</sup>

As a writer, Morrison intentionally draws from the heritage of the fugitive slaves, whose voyages of self-realization not only produced the rich literary tradition of which she is a part but also, concretely, played a pivotal role in liberating the country from slavery and forcing a confrontation with the basic paradox of American freedom.<sup>19</sup> Not all of Morrison's work focuses directly on slavery, but

15 These references appear in the following novels (in order): *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Jazz* (1992), *A Mercy* (2008), *Paradise* (1997).

16 Robert Gooding-Williams, "Fugitive Slave Mentality," *The Stone*, *New York Times*, March 27, 2012. Among the excellent recent studies of black fugitivity in political theory, see Barnor Hesse, "Escaping Liberty: Western Hegemony, Black Fugitivity," *Political Theory* 42 (June 2014): 288–313; Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas*.

17 For an extended exploration of the theme of migration in Morrison's fiction through the 1992 novel *Jazz*, see Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin'? The African-American Migration Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For an account of her "symbolic geography" through *Tar Baby* (1981), see Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

18 Morrison, "Slow Walk of Trees," 4.

19 For a classic account of the role of the fugitives in recasting the Civil War as a fight against slavery and ultimately liberating the US from the institution, see W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (1935; repr., Cleveland: Meridian, 1964). For a more recent discussion, see Steven Hahn, "Did We Miss the Greatest Slave Rebellion in Modern History?" in *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 55–114.

it is hard to find a novel or essay that is not touched by it; and that is precisely the point.<sup>20</sup> Morrison returns again and again to modernity's defining disaster (which is not to say the *only* disaster) and to the responses of the enslaved to their situation in order to grasp what it means to imagine the practice and do the work of "the ultimate liberation theory" whose coming is perpetually forestalled. Across the body of her writing, she unpacks the puzzle of how "black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities."<sup>21</sup> Beyond showing how "blackness" gives birth to "literary 'whiteness'" in the development of the canon, moreover, Morrison looks forward toward the ways in which the history of black people could reshape the idea of American democracy.<sup>22</sup> As Salamishah Tillet notes, Morrison's capacity to confront the horrors of slavery and still find in that history a site of both aesthetic generativity and political possibility is "the ultimate rhetorical coup."<sup>23</sup>

Crucially, Morrison resists romanticizing the past or the men and women who lived it. If her writing is animated by memory, it discredits any tilt toward nostalgia or vindication. When she brings to light the undocumented instances of heroism that have shaped black history, she does not shy from accounts of unheroic action, of ignorance, selfishness, and meanness. The heroine of *Sula*, for example, embodies a form of self-definition that is inspiring in its refutation of the brutally enforced restraints on black women under Jim Crow. Yet while Sula fashions herself as a "redwood" and not a "stump,"<sup>24</sup> despite the long odds against her, she is not readily available for admiration insofar as her audacity is grounded in a sense of irresponsibility toward the welfare and feelings of others. Morrison also refuses to spare Sula's rule-abiding best friend, Nel, who watches Sula accidentally kill a child and then remains silent, a complicit partner in the death. Morrison continues this exploration of characters who do *not* always successfully "combine being a woman with being a responsible person" through her most recent novel, *God Help the Child*, which begins with a mother's act of disavowal of blame for the appearance of her "blue-black" daughter.<sup>25</sup> Over and over, Morrison's work echoes James Baldwin's observation that "black people are just like everybody else. We are also mercenaries, dictators, murderers, liars. We are human, too."<sup>26</sup> In other words, Morrison's rendering of "the political potentialities of ordinary citizens" accentuates both their ordinariness and the extraordinary feats their survival requires.

20 Stephen Best makes a forceful case that Morrison's *A Mercy* radically questions the centrality of slavery for understanding black Americans' contemporary situation. Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73 (September 2012): 453–74.

21 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 38.

22 Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 9.

23 Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 18.

24 Morrison, *Sula*, 143.

25 Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).

26 James Baldwin, "The American Dream and the American Negro," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin's / Marek, 1985), 406.

The remainder of this chapter explores these elements of Morrison's democratic thinking by focusing on the intertwining of fugitivity and responsibility in her writing. In the next section I consider the terrain across which African Americans have moved, what Morrison calls "critical geography." Although she uses the term in the context of an exploration of the American literary tradition, her geographic sensibility is democratic in at least three significant ways. First, she asks readers to see the land as a site of flight, exile, escape, and to understand the connections between place and human flourishing. Second, she emphasizes disregarded spaces, the interiorities not marked on conventional maps or typically contemplated by political theorists; these are the spaces where slaves and runaways and outlaws have made homes for themselves. Third, her emphasis on subjects-in-flight deterritorializes the idea of democracy, disconnects it from a preoccupation with borders or walls. In the third section I draw out Morrison's concept of responsibility to ask what kind of democratic subjectivity emerges from Morrison's narration of the fugitives' stories. Like Ella, a leader of the free black community in *Beloved's* antebellum Ohio, so much of Morrison's literary-political practice consists in "listen[ing] for the holes—the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask." Unlike Ella, however, Morrison refuses the protective armor of personal disconnection: "'Don't love nothing.'"<sup>27</sup> Morrison listens lovingly and focuses especially hard on her characters' efforts to take responsibility for themselves and for each other. Although the question of responsibility reverberates across her writing, I highlight two figures: Sethe, whose story forms the backbone of Morrison's 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, and Frank Money, the central character in her novel *Home* (2012). Both narratives track the movements of African Americans, one in the mid-nineteenth century and the other in the mid-twentieth century; and both relate how they have contended with white Americans' attributions to them of both an absence and an excess of personal responsibility and how they have attempted, against the odds, to become accountable to themselves and each other.

### Remapping American Democracy

At the beginning of *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison's meditation on the unowned "Africanist presence" in the American literary canon, she juxtaposes her reading practices to European expansion in the New World. Morrison describes this project of mapping, or countercartography, as a "critical geography."<sup>28</sup> It is a way of regarding new spaces and conceiving forms of exploration without conquest. While geography here serves as a metaphor—the new world she maps is that of America's literature—it also reveals the degree to which Morrison's imagination is

27 Morrison, *Beloved*, 108.

28 Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 3.

attuned to the importance of place. Both her novels and her essays devote careful attention to the places her characters inhabit and across which they move. Where some places nurture community, enable dissent, or serve as receptacles for the animating spirit of ancestors, others imprison, alienate, deaden.<sup>29</sup> Democratic life, Morrison suggests, requires the cultivation of democratic space. Accordingly, her tribute to Baldwin, her friend and “ancestor,” uses a language of geography that is both metaphorical and not. Baldwin’s words, she muses, emboldened her and other black writers “to appropriate an alien, hostile, all-white geography, because [Baldwin] had discovered that ‘this world [meaning history] is white no longer and it will never be white again.’”<sup>30</sup> She also draws upon the experiences of the enslaved, who created what Stephanie Camp calls a “rival geography”; countering the fixity of plantation property, these women and men devised opportunities for expression and resistance to captivity through their own movements and their reinterpretation of space through mobility.<sup>31</sup> History, in Morrison’s hands, conveys the shape and texture of the material environments in which citizens and noncitizens live. Further, Morrison limns a way of being in the world where the objective is not mastery of others but the possibility of movement without being conquered. Critical geography opens the possibility of experiencing “the concrete thrill of borderlessness” and asking what it would take to realize a living space that is “both snug and wide open.”<sup>32</sup>

Gifted with a richly pastoral imagination, Morrison re-creates American places of staggering beauty and violence and lavishes attention on the natural world. Yet she eschews the colonizing imagination of a gleaming, empty land. The topography she describes is always traversed by different peoples and inhabited by “rememories.” This term, which appears in *Beloved* as noun and verb, connotes both the lasting power of images of past events or structures that have been effaced by time and the active recollection of those images. Interpreters have understood rememory as “practices that affirm life in the face of death” and “as something which possesses (or haunts) one rather than something which one possesses.”<sup>33</sup> Together, these readings indicate how Morrison advances an alternative to po-

29 See Toni Morrison, “The Place of the Idea; The Idea of the Place,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, November 27, 1996, 14–16.

30 Toni Morrison, “James Baldwin: His Voice Remembered,” in *What Moves at the Margin*, 92. Morrison, who is ever attentive to the importance of first and last words, is quoting the final lines from Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village,” which are also the last words of his 1955 essay collection, *Notes of a Native Son*.

31 Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

32 Morrison, “Home,” 9, 12 (the second phrase originally comes from *Jazz*, and this idea appears again in *Paradise*).

33 For the first interpretation, see Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), 147. For the second and third, see Mae G. Henderson, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Re-membering the Body as Historical Text,” in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), 67.

litical thinking that erases the violence of founding and deliberately forgets the people whose unacknowledged destruction has been integral to both the liberal political imagination and the establishment of an American “empire for liberty.”<sup>34</sup>

Morrison’s novels regard the land from the vantage of the hunted, not the hunters. When Paul D, one of the central figures in *Beloved*, runs from slavery, from the chain gang, and from the pain of human connection, the narrator remarks: “In all those escapes he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his.”<sup>35</sup> Again and again, Morrison arrests the reader with sentences like this one: sentences that simultaneously reproduce the pleasures of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting a miraculously gorgeous place and the fraught position of women and men whose human right to occupation or self-determination is continually in question. The maps she draws, in other words, display the world from the perspective of what Nancy Bentley calls “the fourth dimension”:

The figure of the fourth dimension places emphasis not on color-line separation but on the coexistence of a distinct zone of experience with a three-dimensional world that remains oblivious to it. Figured as a dimension, being black means being both present and absent in human time and space—“your feelings no longer count, they are not a part of history.” Although he walks and talks in the same streets as white people, the black man is aware that his lived experience—his human being—somehow exists elsewhere, in a zone outside of what counts as discernible reality.<sup>36</sup>

To say that black women and men inhabit “a zone outside of what *counts* as discernible reality,” however, is not to say that they do not have a distinctive vantage on their historical circumstances or that they are not required to act.

In this light, Morrison’s attention to the names of streets, businesses, and neighborhoods is not simply literary embellishment. These names may reflect parallel realities, as when the black residents of Mercy in *Song of Solomon* defy official efforts to stamp out their designation of Doctor Street as the place where the town’s one African American physician once lived. When town maps and the Post Office prevail in their official naming of Mains Avenue, the black citizens persist in their defiance, renaming it Not Doctor Street to signal the truths of their own history.<sup>37</sup> Their insistence on retaining their naming practices challenges what Clarissa Hayward calls the “ordinary stories” of homeownership and com-

34 Morrison’s writing attends to the layered, interactive character of dispossession and to the relationship between the movement of African Americans and the losses sustained by indigenous communities. From her imagination of seventeenth-century Atlantic colonies in *A Mercy* to the layered histories of occupation on the “unassigned land” of the West in *Paradise*, Morrison confronts readers with the thefts effaced by dreams of *terra nullius*.

35 Morrison, *Beloved*, 316.

36 Bentley explains that she derives this term from W. E. B. Du Bois’s unfinished story “A Vacation Unique.” Nancy Bentley, “The Fourth Dimension: Kinlessness and African American Narrative,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 281.

37 Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977; repr., New York: Vintage, 2004), 4.

munity development that devalue “black places.”<sup>38</sup> This is not to say that Morrison represents black self-naming projects as innocent. On the contrary, she is alert to the internal power struggles that attend all communal claims to space. She both reveals the degree to which African American homes and communities have been susceptible to arbitrary invasion and appropriation by whites and exposes the illusory character of literal and figurative efforts to build barriers against outsiders.<sup>39</sup> Indeed Morrison’s writing devotes a great deal of attention to the question of how to differentiate those moments of collective self-definition or founding that are democratic and life affirming from those that constitute new forms of oppressive power.<sup>40</sup>

As Morrison herself and many of her critics have remarked, her books are not only concerned with landscapes but also preoccupied with the “interior life” of women and men who inhabit the “fourth dimension.” Situating herself as a descendant of the authors of slave narratives, Morrison is not bound by the same political exigencies that required that they dissemble or paper over the worst truths of slave life in order to be sufficiently credible and palatable to their audiences. Thus freed, she rends the veil that earlier authors like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs dropped over “things too difficult to relate,” and she does the same for the women and men who did not write their lives at all. That they did not write about their interior lives, she avers, does not mean that they lacked them.<sup>41</sup> Morrison announces that this is so from the publication of her first novel, when she re-creates an entire world from the “yearning” of a little black girl who wants blue eyes and endures violation and disregard, and she persists throughout her career in seeking words that might do justice to the thoughts and feelings and private experiences of “the persons no one inquired of.”<sup>42</sup>

Morrison’s work is also defined by another kind of interior life. Even as she focuses on movement, she also pays attention to the private or disregarded spaces of African American experience. Both indoors and outside, these spaces include white kitchens, a black-owned hotel, clearings, cabins, the holds of slave ships, and Harlem tenements. They may be sites of violence, but they also provide “zones of refuge” from the racial terror of slavery and Jim Crow.<sup>43</sup> In a modern world created out of the Middle Passage and through the appropriation of native lands, these sites provide a context for fugitivity as Jimmy Casas Klausen defines it: “mobile self-assertion and either geographic or cultural distancing from dom-

38 Clarissa Rile Hayward, *How Americans Make Race: Stories, Spaces, Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

39 See Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2014).

40 These issues are at the heart of *Paradise*, for example.

41 Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 103–24.

42 Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” 22.

43 Neil Roberts uses this term from James C. Scott to describe the freedom of maroon communities in the Americas. Scott quoted in Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 5.

inating others.”<sup>44</sup> Often they are places where communities of women gather, away from the imperatives of patriarchal order: Pilate’s house in *Song of Solomon*, the convent in *Paradise*, the multiracial household that (briefly) outlives Jacob Vaark in *A Mercy*, to name just a few.

If Morrison’s remapping mostly concentrates on the territory of the United States, it does not stop there. All of the novels except *Tar Baby* take place almost entirely within the US, but they offer glimmers of connectedness to other worlds, and especially to Africa. First, Morrison discerns the global reach of the racial contract in practices of appropriation and unacknowledged fascination that make possible the writing of Americans like Poe and Cather and Hemingway, on the one hand, and African adventurers such as Conrad, Dinesen, and Hemingway, on the other.<sup>45</sup> Where the mutual constitution of blackness and slavery in the US created “a playground for the imagination,” “literary Africa—outside, notably, of the work of some white South African writers—was an inexhaustible playground for tourists and foreigners.”<sup>46</sup> When she writes, furthermore, of this Africa as a “big-hearted” site for white self-exploration, she links both the colonial past and post-/neocolonial present to Americans’ ongoing engagement with an “Africanist presence” it cannot avow.

Beyond her sense of intimacy between white fantasies about black America and the tropes of savagery and sensuality that have shaped white writing about Africa, Morrison also identifies her own relation to the world that was lost in the Middle Passage. In an appreciative but critical review of Albert Murray’s *South to a Very Old Place*, Morrison rebukes Murray for “build[ing] dichotomy from diaspora.” While she is alert to the romance of making too much of that fractured connection, Morrison does not underestimate its power: “Obviously a strong identification of black people from all over the world with each other (forced, awkward or sentimental as it may be at first) is as frightening a thought to racism as the gathering of the poor of all nations under one compelling idea is to imperialism.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed she goes further in an interview with Paul Gilroy to suggest that her stronger experience of identification is not with black Americans who fix their sights on an idea of their Americanness but with “Third World peoples in the diaspora.”<sup>48</sup>

Although Morrison’s fiction does not elaborate on this idea at length, it is nonetheless appropriate to ask how her writing might be understood in conjunction

44 Jimmy Casas Klausen, *Fugitive Rousseau: Slavery, Primitivism, and Political Freedom* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 9.

45 I borrow the term “racial contract” from Charles Mills. See Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

46 The first quotation is from *Playing in the Dark*, 38. The second comes from “On *The Radiance of the King* by Camara Laye,” in *What Moves at the Margin*, 119.

47 Morrison, “Going Home with Bitterness and Joy: Review of *South to a Very Old Place* by Albert Murray,” in *What Moves at the Margin*, 116.

48 Toni Morrison, quoted in “Living Memory: A Meeting with Toni Morrison,” in Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993), 180.



with Brent Hayes Edwards's conception of diaspora as a "practice" and Richard Iton's investigation of diaspora as "a form of resistance."<sup>49</sup> Diaspora, according to Iton, disrupts and dislocates mainstream political norms and calls attention to the continuing operation of the colonial in a democratic society that has never owned its colonial character. In that vein, we might consider the pivotal roles of black soldiers in Morrison's novels, which draw upon the experiences of citizens who went abroad in the service of American political ideals and returned to poverty, humiliation, and the ever-present threat of lynching. These conscripted cosmopolitans undercut heroic national narratives and reveal instead the personal and collective costs of American crusades to make the world safe for democracy. Like Shadrack, the World War I veteran in *Sula* who inaugurates National Suicide Day, they understand the imperial motivations of these crusades and the incoherence of any democracy saved by a white supremacist army.

At the same time, the broad reach of Morrison's imagination also conjures a history of affective, and potentially political, linkages beyond the American nation-state. When, in *Beloved*, Sethe tries to recall her mother and Nan, the enslaved woman who was tasked with mothering all of the children whose biological parents were in the field, she remembers what she has lost: their African language. But in the memory of the loss, Sethe also joins her own story to earlier violations and acts of revolt; what she learned from her mother's and Nan's language is something of the experience of the Middle Passage, of repeated rape and of her mother's decision to throw away all of her children—except "small girl Sethe"—rather than allow them to live a slaved life.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the tale of the "flying African" links Milkman Dead, the protagonist of *Song of Solomon*, to a mythological past, to the history of his own grandfather's murder by covetous white neighbors, and to a way of living freely in the face of oppression as embodied in his bootlegging mystical aunt, Pilate.<sup>51</sup> These texts neither enjoin a movement "back to Africa" nor envision the revolutionary potential of a "darker world" poised to take its revenge on white Europe and America.<sup>52</sup> They do, however, indicate a geographic sensibility that "pluralizes democratic spaces, energies, and allegiances."<sup>53</sup> Morrison's vision, which is born out of the experiences of women and men who forged new lines of affiliation and created opportunities for collective and individual action without the promise of a fixed homeland, decouples democracy and territory.

49 Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

50 Morrison, *Beloved*, 74.

51 Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

52 The phrase "darker world" is Du Bois's. See "The Souls of White Folk," in *Darkwater: Voices within the Veil* (1920; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999).

53 William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 161.

### Taking Responsibility

In light of its current circulation in political discourse, we might expect the word *responsibility* to serve as a prime example of what Morrison decries as “official language smitheryed to sanction ignorance and preserve privilege.” Such language, she declares, “is a suit of armor polished to shocking glitter, a husk from which the knight departed long ago.”<sup>54</sup> Responsibility, I would argue, has become one of the crucial markers of contemporary inequality: where some members of the polity are presumed to be responsible, in the criminal sense, others are presumed responsible in the sense of independent, upstanding, dutiful citizens. Popular uses of this term often conjure degrading images of black existence and efface the constraints imposed by racialized structures and practices that have been sedimented over generations. In Morrison’s hands, the word regains its humanity and its history. She inquires what it means to be “a responsible person” and to do so in the face of the active and often disdain of other citizens.

Morrison asks us to consider what this means in her 1993 Nobel Lecture in Literature. A reflection on liberation and language—both the power of language to liberate and the power of human beings to liberate language from its worst depredations—the Nobel speech narrates an encounter between a woman who is “old, female, black, blind” and a group of young people. The exchange centers on the meaning of a bird that may or may not be in the hands of the youths whom the old woman cannot see. What are the younger people seeking? Why won’t the old woman respond as they ask? What does she offer them instead? As Morrison’s lecture travels over different possibilities, traces the concrete effects of what words can and cannot do and what has been done to them, Morrison pursues pointed questions about responsibility. For the younger generation, responsibility is a baffling requirement, an order that has no context. “We have heard all our short lives that we have to be responsible,” they complain. “What could that possibly mean in the catastrophe this world has become?”<sup>55</sup>

Morrison’s novels do not attempt a single answer to their question. Exquisitely attentive to the fraught character of her own responsibilities as a writer, she recasts it, asking what responsibility has meant historically to women and men whose capacity for being accountable was both utterly denied and exaggerated beyond human possibility. She investigates the constraints under which the enslaved attempted to take responsible action, how their descendants negotiated a postemancipation order in which “to be responsible was to be blameworthy,”<sup>56</sup> and how subsequent generations improvised under new conditions as they strove to become reliable persons in a society in which the specific contours of antiblack

54 Toni Morrison, “The Nobel Lecture in Literature,” in *What Moves at the Margin*, 200.

55 Morrison, “Nobel Lecture in Literature,” 205.

56 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 125.

legislation and social opprobrium shifted rather than disappeared. In their efforts to act responsibly and thereby redefine what that means in a white supremacist democracy, Morrison's characters elicit readers' judgment of their own responsibilities. By way of illustration, I will consider one of Morrison's best-known characters and one of her newest.

So much has been written about the novel *Beloved* that I am hesitant to start here. Still, Morrison's account of Sethe, a fugitive mother with a harrowing sense of the necessity of protecting her children from reenslavement, returns, repeatedly and generatively, to questions of responsibility. Spinning a narrative web that connects the Middle Passage to the post-Civil War period, *Beloved* recounts the efforts of a community of African Americans to escape bondage and its aftereffects and build free lives for themselves in Ohio. Morrison's novel brings to life a context where the killing of black children by the conditions of their enslavement was commonplace, and one act of resistance could crystallize the distortions of the idea of responsibility that slavery engendered.

In interviews and the preface to *Beloved*, Morrison makes it clear that her novel is catalyzed by, but does not attempt to re-create, the story of Margaret Garner.<sup>57</sup> In 1856 Garner, her husband, and their children fled from slavery to the free state of Ohio, where they were discovered by slave catchers. Rather than allow the children to be returned to bondage, Garner killed her three-year-old daughter with a butcher knife and tried to kill the others. Her case became a cause célèbre, available for the conflicting purposes of abolitionists and slavery's defenders. If Garner was largely silent about her act, Mark Reinhardt observes, others were quick to fill the void.<sup>58</sup> Under the law and in the eyes of many commentators, Garner's actions could be understood through the terms of responsible subjectivity: either she embodied such subjectivity, as the admiring comments of the abolitionists would have it, or she proved the proslavery faction right by demonstrating that the enslaved belonged to a fundamentally lower order of humanity.

Even contemporary readings fall too easily into the trap of reading the passage in terms that Morrison's account of responsibility disturbs. When Eddie Glaude interprets the novel through the lens of pragmatism, for example, he concludes: "Sethe's choice is between competing values, between incompatible, but morally justifiable, courses of action."<sup>59</sup> Her status as a responsible person is vindicated. But here is how Morrison sets up the scene: Sethe, working in the garden, recog-

57 In the groundbreaking documentary history of black life that she edited/curated as *The Black Book*, Morrison includes a newspaper article on "the slave mother who killed her child." *The Black Book*, 35th anniv. ed., ed. Middleton Harris, Morris Levitt, Roger Furman, and Ernest Smith (New York: Random House, 2009), 10.

58 Mark Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? Slavery, Silence, and the Politics of Ventriloquism," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Autumn 2002): 81-119.

59 Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 41.

nizes her captors approaching, and hears the wings of hummingbirds and feels their beaks through her hair:

And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.<sup>60</sup>

This remarkable string of fragmented sentences aims to capture something of a lived experience of trying to enact kinship in the face of kinlessness. Even as Morrison dramatizes the various, invisible ways in which African Americans *have* taken responsibility, in other words, I think she is seeking to illuminate something else in this scene. The account of Sethe's action lays bare a situation when there are no choices that a person could responsibly or reasonably accept, and still she must do something. To debate the degree of Sethe's blameworthiness or to redeem her as a rational chooser is to deflect the full weight of the experience of that history as an abyss. Instead the scene Morrison conjures is closer to Baldwin's reflection that "one is always in the position of having to decide between amputation and gangrene. . . . The idea of going through life as a cripple is more than one can bear, and equally unbearable is the risk of swelling up slowly, in agony, with poison. And the trouble, finally, is that *the risks are real even if the choices do not exist.*"<sup>61</sup> This is not the whole of African American history or even Sethe's story—far from it. But Morrison holds our attention in this moment, when there are no acceptable courses of action, and demands that we grapple with the full weight of the criminality of the *context* in which Sethe kills.

She does not leave us there, however. Rather, Morrison follows her characters as they aspire to forge forms of accountability disallowed by slavery and the postemancipation racial order. Although not much older than a girl, Sethe proves her capacity for responsible action by conspiring in and fulfilling a plan to send three children to freedom and follow them, even after her husband disappears, even after her back has been torn open by the lash, even after her milk has been stolen in a shocking assault, even after she sees her fellow slave, Paul D, with an iron bit in his mouth, and even though she must give birth in midflight. It is little wonder that when Paul D arrives at her Ohio home eighteen years later, Sethe's

60 Morrison, *Beloved*, 192.

61 James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 112 (emphasis added). My reading of this scene departs not only from Glaude's but also from Sharon Krause's, despite the affinity between her account of agency, freedom, and responsibility and the account I draw from Morrison. See Sharon R. Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 93.

response is relief that she can, just possibly, give up some fraction of the all-encompassing sense of responsibility that carried her out of Kentucky and that rewarded her with one dead child, two disappeared, and the fourth haunted and underdeveloped. "What she knew," when Paul D touches her for the first time, "was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands."<sup>62</sup>

*Beloved* also discloses as a lie the pretense of responsible action through which white Americans have understood their behavior. Even at Sweet Home, the plantation from which Sethe flees, where Mr. Garner boasts of treating his slaves like men, the truth is that they are "watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke."<sup>63</sup> The master's responsibility to the enslaved, furthermore, is revealed as a hollow form of self-aggrandizement when he dies and the management of the plantation falls to a crueler man known as Schoolteacher. The deceit undergirding white conceptions of accountability or stewardship appears without disguise in the new master's response to Sethe's killing of her child: "See what happened when you overbeat creatures God had given you the responsibility of—the trouble it was, and the loss."<sup>64</sup>

Slaveholders are not alone in indulging the fantasy that they are responsible for the welfare of the enslaved, in a positive sense, even as they admit no responsibility for the criminal character of slavery itself. Through the figure of Edwin Bodwin, *Beloved* also discloses the unseemliness of some forms of white abolitionism. Taking pleasure in remembering how Sethe's predicament once provided a platform for his own performance of political heroism, Bodwin exposes the racial charade of responsible action.<sup>65</sup> Without saying so directly, furthermore, Morrison invites readers to consider how this mismatch between white perceptions and the reality of responsibility in the nineteenth century might still echo in American public discourse today.

For Morrison, individual efforts, no matter how admirable, cannot be understood apart from the context of community. Agency, in this sense, is interactive. *Beloved* thus narrates both the damage done by a failure of collective accountability, when the African American community to which Sethe escapes turns its back on her as punishment for what they perceive as exaggerated self-sufficiency, and the miracle that is possible when they take responsibility for each other. Thus when Ella learns that Sethe is slowly being eaten alive, presumably by the ghost of her dead child, she rouses her neighbors to respond. "Building voice upon voice," their singing exorcises the ghost. Even if the long-term effects of their action remain undecided, the moment of shared responsibility saves Sethe and refounds

<sup>62</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 148.

<sup>64</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 176.

<sup>65</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 306–7.

the community.<sup>66</sup> This is not to say that they are alone in being responsible for Sethe's fate. In its meditation on the human costs of the Fugitive Slave Act, *Beloved* also implicates the state and its citizens for the responsibilities they do not admit and the crimes they engender, whether deliberately or indirectly.

Frank Money's story unfolds in a different time and place from Sethe's, but Morrison's attention to the entwining of flight and responsibility also gives shape to the narrative of *Home*. In fact, the connective membranes between the two novels are so thick that they seem to communicate back and forth to one another. In *Home* readers follow the reverse migration of Frank, a Korean War veteran, who makes his way from a psychiatric ward in Seattle back to Lotus, Georgia, the site of most of his growing up and "the worst place in the world," a place where there is "no future."<sup>67</sup> Frank's life did not begin in Lotus; in fact, his parents might be called fugitive slaves of the Jim Crow era. Forced out of Bandera County, Texas, by "men, both hooded and not,"<sup>68</sup> they took their children (four-year-old Frank and his sister, Ycidra [Cee], who was born on the road) to Georgia, where they worked grueling field jobs and left their two children in the care of a spiteful grandmother. The movement does not follow a bondage-to-freedom trajectory so much as a transition from one form of bondage to another. It reinforces George Shulman's observation that "for . . . Morrison there is no exodus from Egypt."<sup>69</sup> What these American Israelites find in Georgia is relief from imminent threat by white neighbors, but not much more.

Frank's flight out of Lotus as a young man takes him to the newly integrated US army and to Korea, and the novel implies that he would keep running indefinitely if he weren't tied to Cee and if she were not in jeopardy. But he is, and she is. Abandoned in Atlanta by a man named "Principal," who married her for a used Ford, Cee finds a job in the well-to-do white suburb of Buckhead. There she is held captive by a "gentlemanly" doctor who experiments on his poor patients and ultimately makes a hash of Cee's womb. "Dr. Beau's" study of racial science initially enthralls Cee, who cannot see what Morrison's readers recognize: a form of book-learning that updates Schoolteacher's anatomizing of Sethe's "human" and "animal" characteristics in *Beloved*.<sup>70</sup> Learning that Cee needs him but not knowing the extent of her near-mortal injuries at the hands of Dr. Beau, Frank makes his way across Jim Crow America (North and South) to carry out the res-

66 Morrison, *Beloved*, 302.

67 Toni Morrison, *Home* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 83.

68 Morrison, *Home*, 10.

69 George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 183.

70 Morrison, *Beloved*, 228. Morrison's skillful uses of the animal-human contrast in *Home* (for example, when the memory of two horses "who rose up like men" is juxtaposed to the disposal of a black corpse) also recalls Paul D's recollection of being taunted by Mister, a rooster, who appears to glory in his relative freedom.

cue. Taking to the road in the 1950s was dangerous business, Morrison shows, as dangerous as combat; indeed Frank's encounters with violence along the way recall Gooding-Williams' commentary on the long reach of Americans' "fugitive slave mentality." And the destination promises nothing like sanctuary. Indeed as he explains his return to Lotus, Frank notes:

*I didn't miss anything about that place except the stars.*

*Only my sister in trouble could force me to even think about going in that direction.*

*Don't paint me as some enthusiastic hero.*

*I had to go but I dreaded it.*<sup>71</sup>

The novel describes Cee as "the first person [Frank] ever took responsibility for," but she is not the last or only one. The novel also pursues other relations, including Frank's efforts to save a friend in Korea and his preoccupation with the fate of a black man, whose body is buried brutally in secret, in Lotus.

Importantly, this does not mean that Frank's responsibility is his alone. Morrison's explorations of the experiences of the dispossessed illustrate starkly that responsibility to another person is not to be confused with ownership of that person. Cee's recovery follows not only from her brother's rescue but also from the hard work of a group of women, who resemble their forebears in Morrison's imagined community in *Beloved*. Together and separately, they stitch and clean and administer the liquids that make Cee puke out the poison of the doctor's ministrations. Together and separately, "they took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else needed them."<sup>72</sup> Echoing the admonition of *Beloved*'s Baby Suggs, who sends her granddaughter, defenseless, out of her house and into an alien world, theirs is a love that recognizes that Cee's capacity to recover from the injuries of her past will depend on the combined efforts of the community and the agency she claims for herself:

Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world.<sup>73</sup>

Is this personal responsibility, pure and simple? Not exactly. For Cee's self-determining action is always joined to the work of others, and Morrison's account

71 Morrison, *Home*, 84. The chapters in which Frank speaks directly to an unnamed writer are presented in italics.

72 Morrison, *Home*, 123.

73 Morrison, *Home*, 126.

never loses sight of the multiple forms of oppression that shape the context in which Cee acts. Further, Cee's recovery, like Denver's blossoming womanhood in the final section of *Beloved*, is shadowed by loss. Images of babies she cannot have. Memories of violence she has witnessed and violations she has endured. But Cee's recovery, like Denver's, seems to hold out the possibility of a passage out of slavery into a qualified freedom. As Frank reflects: "His sister was gutted, infertile, but not beaten. She could know the truth, accept it, and keep on quilting."<sup>74</sup>

Frank's story, like Sethe's, complicates that trajectory, for they both are authors of acts of violence of their own. Sethe's killing of a beloved child bespeaks an excess of responsibility, an attempt at sovereignty that is simultaneously unspeakable and, at least incompletely, comprehensible. Frank, by contrast, narrates a murder that is stunning in its gratuity. About two-thirds of the way into the novel, he tells the story of how, while on patrol in Korea, he spots a girl's hand groping through the GIs' garbage in search of something to eat. What happens next is horrifying. A soldier arrives to relieve Frank and take the next shift. He sees the girl, and she responds by smiling and touching his crotch. Almost instantly, the girl is gone. Shot by the American soldier, "only the hand remains in the trash, clutching its treasure, a spotted, rotting orange."<sup>75</sup> Frank's witnessing of the crime recalls what he and Cee saw as children when they covertly watched a group of men burying an unidentified black body. Like the hand of the hungry girl, the dead man is visible only as a "black foot." Although Morrison does not specify, she implies that the murders in both cases are most likely the deeds of white men.

And yet. Five chapters later, Frank retells his story:

*I shot the Korean girl in her face.*

*I am the one she touched.*

*I am the one who saw her smile.*

*I am the one she said "Yum-yum" to.*

*I am the one she aroused.*

*A child. A wee little girl.*

*I didn't think. I didn't have to.*

*Better she should die.*

*How could I let her live after she took me down to a place I didn't know was in me?*<sup>76</sup>

Placed in between a chapter on his sister's healing and a chapter that resurrects memories of a gambling house where two black men, father and son, were forced to fight each other to the death for white men's entertainment, Frank's confession may demand a form of acknowledgment and acceptance from the reader that is

<sup>74</sup> Morrison, *Home*, 132.

<sup>75</sup> Morrison, *Home*, 94–95.

<sup>76</sup> Morrison, *Home*, 133–34.



different from the complex witness called forth by *Beloved*.<sup>77</sup> Sethe and her fellow fugitives exemplify a kind of authority that is democratic, because it knows at the deepest level the price and fleetingness of “unslaved life.” Wrestling with *Beloved* can enlarge and unsettle readers’ understanding of what it means to be a responsible subject under unspeakably oppressive conditions. Yet Frank’s story may proffer a different, perhaps more broadly imitable, model for democratic thought.

The arbitrariness of Frank’s act and the shape of his response to it mirror the mnemonic practices of a guilty white citizenry. “*I felt so proud grieving over my dead friends,*” Frank recalls of his war experiences. “*How I loved them. . . . My mourning was so thick it completely covered my shame.*”<sup>78</sup> Not only does Frank’s crime mimic many of the historic features of white power—its sexual character, the inversion of protection and violation, the expectation of subaltern performances of pleasure—but his grief resembles the self-serving-and-deceiving national mourning efforts that worship the losses that created the republic in the eighteenth century, that memorialize fratricidal conflict in the nineteenth, and that honor the bands of brothers who went to war to save democracy in the twentieth. Morrison’s depiction of Frank’s mourning exposes the foul air that blows beneath what Du Bois calls “the fragrance of sacrifice.” The latter elevates and aestheticizes the youthful death of some soldiers while obscuring the race hatred and greed that cause the uncelebrated deaths of so many others.<sup>79</sup> It permeates official memories that have no more place for the losses sustained by Frank and his ancestors than his original narrative has for Korean girls who approach the wrong American soldier in their quest for food. Still, unlike most of his fellow citizens, Frank does something about his crime. He owns it, and then he offers the unnamed body in Lotus the dignity of a burial he cannot give the dead girl.

Although both *Beloved* and *Home* ask readers to re-view questions of responsibility from different vantages, Frank’s story speaks more directly to contemporary readers. His decision to offer a form of redress for a gratuitous killing that is not his doing but is part of his inheritance gestures toward what citizens today can and must do in the face of the legacies that are ours. Being accountable for a bloody collective history of racial slavery and its successor regimes requires that we own the violence committed in our names, whether we would endorse that violence or not, and that we reckon with the living vestiges of those acts. As Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts notes in the *New York Times*, “The last few years have seen scores of memorials, re-enactments, monuments and editorials coinciding with the sesquicentennial of various events of the Civil War.” Yet, Rhodes-Pitts urges, it is time to wrestle the question of whether recent killings—of Renisha McBride,

77 At the same time, the son’s capitulation to his father’s command that he kill him, which is described as an instance of “devil’s decision making,” recalls Sethe’s flight to the woodshed. Morrison, *Home*, 139.

78 Morrison, *Home*, 132.

79 W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of Beauty and Death,” in *Darkwater*, 130.

Jordan Davis, Oscar Grant, Michael Brown, and the countless others whose names have escaped public notice—more aptly “commemorate the unfinished, perhaps unending, struggle to assert black humanity in a country built on its denial.”<sup>80</sup> That the list of the fallen keeps growing demonstrates how far most Americans remain from facing a history in which some citizens are always potentially seen as fugitives and in which national commemorations are, in fact, acts of flight from that history.

### Going Home

For Morrison, finally, American democracy is the fugitives’ democracy. It must be. By remapping the known world, disclosing what has been hidden or invisible, and opening up new vistas as they were seen by the fugitives who crossed the land in pursuit of responsible lives, Morrison does not simply aim for better descriptions. Like Wolin, she treasures a conception of democracy as “a project concerned with the potentialities of ordinary citizens, that is, with their possibilities for becoming political beings through the self-discovery of common concerns and of modes of action for realizing them.”<sup>81</sup> Beyond Wolin, however, she reminds us that these potentialities are realized only at those moments when the doings of the women and men marked as fugitives and outlaws, the enslaved, the removed, the deported, and the imprisoned are given their due. Prevailing accounts of history, in other words, have things backward. As Morrison reminds us, they obscure truths about who has done the building and, indeed, the founding and refounding, that are fundamental to the life of the polity. As descendants of fugitives and of the Americans who hunted them, Morrison intimates, we can only hope to realize a more democratic polity when we re-view our past, present, and future possibilities from the vantage of subjects in flight.

In the end, Morrison’s words offer few specific political prescriptions. But they do incite. They call on readers to seek alternative policies and found new institutions, to refuse the imprisonment of what she calls the racial house and seek forms of home where it is possible to be “free and situated.”<sup>82</sup> Where the former is fixed and architectural and susceptible to monumentalizing ambition, the latter connects space and movement. The endings of *Beloved* and *Home* intimate that even spaces as unpromising as 124 and Lotus can be refashioned as sites where freedom is conceivable—although its realization is never guaranteed. Shabby and largely invisible to white people, yet unprotected from their incursions, these spaces nonetheless give concrete harbor to fugitives and bear witness to their efforts to define themselves in opposition to the oppressive categories of white democracy.

80 Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, “Extra Men: The Struggle to Assert Black Humanity,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 12, 2014, 14.

81 Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” 31.

82 Morrison, “Home,” 8 and 5, respectively.

Like Wolin's account of the fugitive character of democracy, Morrison's "home" is a fragile accomplishment and a site "where the political is remembered and recreated."<sup>83</sup> Her words, in myriad ways, illuminate a truth that the fugitives know in their bones, and with which she closes *A Mercy*: "There is no protection, but there is difference."<sup>84</sup>

83 Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 43.

84 Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 166.

## 25: Audre Lorde's Politics of Difference

Jack Turner

Audre Lorde's primary contribution to African American political thought is her politics of difference—a politics expressing her basic commitment to relational equality. Pinpointing the connection between Lorde's politics of difference and her relational egalitarianism is crucial: egalitarian commitment is commonplace, yet enacting that commitment is notoriously difficult, requiring a complex set of political tactics calibrated to the race, sex, and class hierarchies of late modernity. Lorde's politics of difference is a set of egalitarian political tactics—helping us map inequalities, organize coalitions, and respect individuals as equality's final subjects and objects. Equality is morally prior, the first commitment; difference is the analytic Lorde uses to determine how to enact that commitment.

Lorde's politics of difference emerged in her writings in the late 1970s and early 1980s, growing out of her identity as a black lesbian feminist who found herself marginalized from the left-wing social movements that most affected her: the feminist movement, the black freedom movement, and the lesbian and gay liberation movement. The financially secure straight white women at the forefront of second-wave feminism, for example, all too often acted as if their own particular concerns represented the concerns of all women, rendering lesbians, poor women, and women of color politically invisible. In 1979, at a conference celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Lorde famously called out white feminist academics for failing to grapple with the ways race and class created internal differentiation within women's oppression:

Poor women and women of Color know there is a difference between the daily manifestations of marital slavery and prostitution because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street. If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color?<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1979), in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing, 1984), 112.

Similarly, Lorde seized on the tensions between her black and lesbian identities to demand that both the black freedom movement and the lesbian and gay liberation movement acknowledge their internal diversity and stop setting oppressions against each other: “Within the lesbian community I am Black, and within the Black community I am a lesbian. Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black. There is no hierarchy of oppression.”<sup>2</sup> Lorde thus laid groundwork for the emergence of the study of “intersectionality” in the late 1980s and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

Lorde, however, did not use the term *intersectionality* to frame her reflections. That neologism denoting the study of intersecting oppressions and their mutually constitutive relationship first emerged in black feminist theory in 1989, when Kimberlé Crenshaw published the first of two articles specifying the concept.<sup>4</sup> Though Lorde’s inquiries anticipated those of intersectionality theorists, *difference* was her principal theoretical term.<sup>5</sup> Two intellectual backgrounds were formative.

The first was mid-1970s black feminism—especially as expressed in the Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement” (1977) calling for greater attention to the “interlocking” nature of racial, gendered, sexual, and class oppressions. Lorde shared the Collective’s concern with tracing these oppressions’ particularities and accounting for their interactions. At the same time, Lorde worried that the Collective fell short of integrating its social critique into a positive vision of the future. Lorde’s quest became to forge a polyvalent language of difference that nested black feminist critique into a political vision of transformative,

2 Lorde, “There Is No Hierarchy of Oppression” (1983), in *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd, Johnnetta Betsch Cole, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 220. Cf. Rudolph P. Byrd’s introduction to *I Am Your Sister*, “Create Your Own Fire: Audre Lorde and the Tradition of Black Radical Thought,” 28–29. Byrd’s introduction is an excellent overview of Lorde’s political thought. This chapter advances his scholarship by analyzing in greater detail the political rhetorical work Lorde’s language of difference does. See also Nora Hanagan, *Democratic Responsibility: The Politics of Many Hands in America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), chap. 4, a perceptive and wide-ranging account of Lorde on the theme of political responsibility.

3 Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

4 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139–67; Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

5 See especially Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider*, 114–23, which I will analyze in detail below. For an important analysis of this essay, see Lester C. Olson, “Liabilities of Language: Audre Lorde Reclaiming Difference,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 4 (1998): 448–70. Olson emphasizes how Lorde transforms the “common-place understanding of ‘difference’ as domination by redefining it as resource.” I emphasize, in contrast, Lorde’s employment of *difference* in four distinct senses, settling finally on a productive ambivalence toward the term.

horizontal relationship—relationship that elicits egalitarian commitment from individuals historically habituated to be both subjects and agents of oppression.

The second formative intellectual background was 1970s (predominantly but not exclusively white) academic feminist theory, where debates raged about the meaning and significance of “difference” in the fight for women’s liberation. Up until the 1960s, white feminism had largely fought for women’s equality on grounds of the underlying commonality between women and men, making the differentiation of rights and privileges unwarranted. By the 1970s, however, many white feminists argued that women’s liberation required the affirmation—even celebration—of women’s differences from men, especially as they manifested themselves in the traditionally maternal experiences of care, interdependence, feeling, and connection. But as this discourse—often drawing on German and French philosophical critiques of the logic of identity—registered women’s differences from men, it mostly overlooked women’s differences with each other, especially along lines of class and race.<sup>6</sup> Lorde replanted this discourse of difference in the life experiences of poor women and women of color to produce a poetic language that could surmount the limitations of both Combahee and white academic feminism.

Lorde’s resynthesized politics of difference is theoretically significant, among other reasons, because it anticipated by more than a decade Iris Marion Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), widely seen within contemporary political theory as the watershed philosophical text on the subject. Though Young’s book gave unique analytical structure to the philosophical study of difference, it drew the approach of integrating a multipronged analysis of various specific oppressions into an overarching framework of difference largely from Lorde. Young, in fact, used the last paragraph of Lorde’s famous comments at the Second Sex conference (which became “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in *Sister Outsider* [1984]) as the epigraph to chapter 5 of *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, “The Scaling of Bodies and the Politics of Identity.” Archival evidence indicates that when the forty-five-year-old Lorde delivered these remarks in 1979, a thirty-year-old Young—who presented at the Second Sex conference two days before—sat in the audience.<sup>7</sup> When it came to the politics of difference, Audre Lorde was among Iris Marion Young’s first teachers.

6 For overviews of this history, see Hester Eisenstein, introduction to *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), xv–xx, and Susan J. Hekman, *The Future of Differences: Truth and Method in Feminist Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), chap. 1.

7 Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, [1990] 2011), 122. For the conference program, see “The Second Sex—Thirty Years Later: A Commemorative Conference on Feminist Theory,” September 1979, Audre Lorde Papers, Box 10, Folder 1.2.122, Spelman College Archives. On the enduring importance of *Justice and the Politics of Difference* to contemporary political theory, see Danielle Allen’s foreword to the 2011 edition, as well as Marion Smiley, “Postmodernism Confronts Oppression: Iris Marion Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference*,” in *The Oxford Handbook to Classics in Contemporary Political Theory*, ed. Jacob T. Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

This chapter analyzes “difference” in Lorde’s speeches, essays, and interviews and finds that she uses the word in at least four distinct senses:<sup>8</sup> (1) difference as pretext for division and domination, (2) difference as differentiation in group experience and perspective, (3) difference as site of personal and political growth, (4) difference as marker of individuality.<sup>9</sup> Just as Lorde once claimed that poetry provides the “skeleton architecture” of our lives,<sup>10</sup> this chapter claims that Lorde’s four senses of difference provides the “skeleton architecture” of her political thought, giving it hidden systematicity. The four senses of difference converge on a distinctive view of equality: equality as a relationship that stabilizes the freedom of its participants and ensures them a shared future of politically creative possibility.<sup>11</sup>

This analysis achieves three additional objectives. First, given the ubiquity of “difference” across Lorde’s prose, it provides a synoptic view of her ethics and politics. In addition to the subjects denoted by the senses of difference themselves, this synoptic view covers Lorde’s use of poetic language to resolve the competing epistemic demands of specificity and generality, the Marxian elements of her social theory, the psychological dynamics of domination and submission, the political significance of anger, the status of lesbianism in the black community, and the ethical practice of coalition and solidarity. The extraordinary breadth and depth of Lorde’s ethical and political thought, however, make it impossible to cover everything. The meanings of “the erotic” and of “survival,” for example, are two important subjects in Lorde’s thought that this chapter does not address.

Second, the analysis illustrates Lorde’s contribution to “the difference shift” in late twentieth-century feminist theory<sup>12</sup> and in its conclusion that one of Lorde’s four original senses of difference was “marker of individuality,” shows how the anti-individualist bias of later promoters of a feminist politics of difference—Young being the prime example—departed from Lorde’s original account. Lorde’s

8 To keep this chapter to a manageable scope, I limit myself to Lorde’s prose and exclude her poetry. Lorde’s poems are so densely packed that they require one-by-one analysis. I am currently analyzing the poem “Equal Opportunity” (1984) in a separate paper titled “Audre Lorde’s Anti-Imperial Consciousness.”

9 I do not count Lorde’s use of the word *difference* in its most generic sense—difference as mere dissimilarity (as between a letter and a number), difference as simple contrast (as between orange and blue)—among these four. I limit my disambiguation to the four stronger, more philosophically interesting senses I find in her work.

10 Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not A Luxury” (1977), in *Sister Outsider*, 38.

11 My thoughts on relationality in this chapter are indebted to Nick Bromell’s analysis of relational dignity and relational citizenship in *The Time Is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of U.S. Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), as well as Carol Wayne White’s “Anna Julia Cooper: Radical Relationality and the Ethics of Interdependence,” chap. 8 of this volume.

12 Hekman, *Future of Differences*, 7. Though Hekman provides a short history of this shift in late twentieth-century feminist theory, Lorde is missing from her account. Hekman’s book includes only one mention of Lorde (146), a passing reference to Lorde’s famous dictum on the master’s tools. This chapter corrects that history by illuminating Lorde’s crucial role in the difference shift.

politics of difference was committed to *relational individualism*—a distinct form of individualism that challenges the antirelational tendencies of the competitive, atomistic individualism endemic to heteropatriarchal capitalism.<sup>13</sup>

Third, the analysis helps resolve what Jakeet Singh identifies as an “ambiguity or slippage with respect to the meaning of ‘difference’ as it has circulated within theories of intersectionality.” Singh observes that sometimes theorists of intersectionality use the term *difference* to refer to differences in cultural identity, while other times they use it to refer to differences in structural position. In Singh’s words: “Is intersectionality meant to encompass all aspects of identity—including all forms of self-expression and agentic activity—or is intersectionality solely about oppression, dealing only with aspects of identity insofar as they are oppressed?”<sup>14</sup>

Insofar as intersectionality theorists draw inspiration from Lorde, the root of this confusion may be in Lorde’s use of *difference* as a polyvalent term. Lorde’s first sense of *difference*—difference as pretext for division and domination—refers to the sources of structural differentiation, while her second sense of difference refers to experiential and perspectival dimensions of structural position that together constitute cultural identity. The fact that Lorde uses the same word to refer to these “different kinds of difference” does not help resolve the confusion. But once we recognize and track Lorde’s different senses of *difference*, we set ourselves up—in Nira Yuval-Davis’s words—to distinguish more carefully “between different kinds of difference” and to cut through the ambiguity identified by Singh.<sup>15</sup> In other words, we equip ourselves to navigate not just Lorde’s corpus but the entire discourse of difference with greater philosophical acuity. We also position ourselves to observe how Lorde’s use of *difference* as a polyvalent term is not accidental but deliberate. It is part of a rhetorical strategy designed to cultivate greater sensitivity to difference’s plural meanings and abundant manifestations.

The chapter concludes by circling back to the relationship between Lorde’s politics of difference and her ethics of equality.

### **Intellectual Backgrounds: The Combahee River Collective and 1970s Difference Feminism**

The Combahee River Collective and 1970s difference feminism were the two most immediate intellectual backdrops to the emergence of Lorde’s politics of difference. Lorde attended the first Black Women’s Network Retreat held in South Hadley, Massachusetts, in July 1977, sponsored by the Collective, a Boston-based

<sup>13</sup> Lorde biographer Alexis De Veaux was the first to observe Lorde’s individualism, though she did not analyze it at any length. *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 73.

<sup>14</sup> Jakeet Singh, “Religious Agency and the Limits of Intersectionality,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 4 (2015): 664.

<sup>15</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, “Intersectionality and Feminist Politics,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13, no. 3 (2006): 195, 199.



offshoot of the National Black Feminist Organization.<sup>16</sup> The name Combahee, notes Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “was inspired by a river in South Carolina where Harriet Tubman had mounted a military campaign during the Civil War to free 750 slaves.”<sup>17</sup> The Collective’s Black Feminist Statement—written by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier in April 1977—proclaimed: “We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.”<sup>18</sup> Lorde concurred with Combahee’s centering of black women’s experience in political analysis, as well as with its commitments to identity politics and economic socialism.<sup>19</sup> Yet one year after that first retreat, Lorde reflected in her journal, “I don’t fit into this group.”<sup>20</sup> Some of Lorde’s reasons were personal: some members of the Collective, for example, thought it was inappropriate for black feminists to have white male or white lesbian lovers (Lorde had had both).<sup>21</sup> But Lorde also differed from the Collective on philosophical approach.

A paper Lorde gave at the first retreat reveals her philosophical critique of the Collective specifically and of black feminism generally. She suggested black feminists still lacked “an ongoing vision, and the theory following upon that vision, of why we struggle.”<sup>22</sup> She longed for a general poetic vision of the future that could orient specific struggles: “While we organize around the specific issues of abortion, of sterilization, of health care, we must give some of our energies also consistently to defining the shape of the future toward which we are working, as well as to a constant examination of the nature of the people we wish ourselves to be.”<sup>23</sup> Such a vision could also redefine what it means to relate to each other as humans:

If we restrict ourselves only to the use of those dominant power games which we have been taught to fear, but which we still respect because they have worked within an antihuman context, then we risk defining our work as shifting our own

16 Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 106–107.

17 Beverly Guy-Sheftall, headnote to the Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 231.

18 Combahee River Collective, “Black Feminist Statement,” 232. For Lorde’s personal copy of the statement, see Audre Lorde Papers, Box 10, Folder 1.2.099, Spelman College Archives.

19 On Lorde’s early involvement with the Collective, see Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 106–7, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s interview with Barbara Smith in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 56–59.

20 De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 218.

21 De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 218–19.

22 Lorde, “The First Black Feminist Retreat: July 6, 1977,” in *I Am Your Sister*, 205.

23 Lorde, “First Black Feminist Retreat,” 205.

roles within the same oppressive power relationships, rather than as seeking to alter and redefine the nature of those relationships. This will result only in the eventual rise of yet another oppressed group, this time with us as overseer.<sup>24</sup>

Achieving the power of the oppressor, in Lorde's eyes, is not liberation. Re-creating relationships on the basis of equality is. "Our future survival," Lorde wrote three years after the first meeting of Combahee, "is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality."<sup>25</sup> Lorde's politics of difference aims at the simple but elusive goal of helping citizens relinquish habits of domination and submission so that they may relate to each other as equals engaged in an ongoing process of mutual learning and growth rather than in a competition for livelihood or a life-or-death struggle for recognition. Oppressed populations must transcend "the old and destructive dominant/subordinate mode of human relating and one-sided power, which is even now grinding our earth and our human consciousness into dust."<sup>26</sup>

The influence of Paulo Freire is visible here. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970)—a book Lorde admired—Freire argued that "almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors." "The authentic solution of the oppressor-oppressed contradiction does not lie in a mere reversal of position," Freire continued. The solution instead is bringing into the world a "new being: no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom."<sup>27</sup>

Lorde's remarks at Combahee's first meeting illustrate how her political vision points in two directions simultaneously. On the one hand, it points to the need to understand the *specific* struggles of *specific* populations, such as poor black women's ongoing quest for equal reproductive freedom. On the other hand, it points to the need for *general* language that can identify oppression and rearticulate the meaning of equality across different groups of women and maybe even society at large.<sup>28</sup> Although Lorde once declared that she did not write theory,<sup>29</sup>

24 Lorde, "First Black Feminist Retreat," 205. Cf. Lorde's 1983 interview with Karla Jay, in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 2004), 112.

25 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 122.

26 Audre Lorde, letter to the editor, *Gay Community News* 7, no. 37 (April 12, 1980), 4, quoted in "Sadomasochism: Not about Condemnation—An Interview with Audre Lorde by Susan Leigh Star," in *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 11. Cf. Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 92–93.

27 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniv. ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 45, 57, 49. For Lorde's admiring references to Freire, see "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 123, and "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report" (1984), in *Sister Outsider*, 186.

28 Lorde thus addresses Christine Di Stefano's worry that critical theoretical insistence on ever-more-specific articulations of human identities—and of identity-based oppressions—works at the expense of the activity of generalization at the heart of theory itself. Di Stefano, "Who the Heck Are We? Theoretical Turns against Gender," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12, no. 2 (1991): 92.

29 Nancy K. Bereano, introduction to Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 8.

her insistence on general ethical language that could provide a critical perspective on specific struggles is, in fact, an insistence on theory.<sup>30</sup> Her illuminating use of general theoretical concepts—in the case of the retreat remarks, “dominant power games” and “oppressive power relationships”—demonstrates her proficiency as a theorist, notwithstanding her disavowal of the term.

In her quest for a general theoretical language broad and flexible enough to encompass her myriad ethical and political concerns, Lorde eventually settled on the language of difference. Her first theoretically significant use of the term in her prose occurs in “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” (1977).<sup>31</sup> Her most comprehensive theoretical analysis appears in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1980).

Lorde did not originate the language of difference; it circulated widely in 1970s academic feminism. In April 1979 the Barnard College Women’s Center hosted a conference called The Future of Difference—at which Lorde read from the already published “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”; the conference’s proceedings were then collected by Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine in a 1980 volume titled *The Future of Difference*. Though the volume reprinted “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” and published original chapters by Quandra Prettyman Stadler and Barbara Omolade on black women’s experience, the remaining essays by scholars ranging from Nancy Chodorow to Josette Féral to Carol Gilligan centered mostly on the experiences of middle-class white women in Europe and North America. Féral’s essay illustrates how much of the prevailing discourse of difference had a German and French philosophical inflection. Féral’s politics of difference renounced “the identity principle, the principles of unity and resemblance which allow for the constitution of phallogocentric society. It means choosing marginality (with an emphasis on the *margins*) in order to designate one’s difference, a difference no longer conceived of as an inverted image or double, but as alterity, multiplicity, heterogeneity. It means laying claim to an absolute difference, posited not within the norms but against and *outside* the norms.”<sup>32</sup>

To an extent, Lorde affirms the “non-identical” as Féral does. In “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” she addresses how raw feeling is a source of positive alterity: “Our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaning-

30 Bromell argues that black political thought at its best takes pains “to include both the universal and the particular, the global and the local.” “The value of theory,” he continues, is that it tries “to take a broad view of things by abstracting from a number of particulars. For theory to exist as a mode of thinking and inquiry distinct from the discipline of history, it must allow itself this latitude.” *Time Is Always Now*, 100–101. Lorde engages in political theory precisely in the mode identified by Bromell: taking pains to register the important particulars of political life while still abstracting from them in order to obtain a broader view.

31 Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” 37.

32 Josette Féral, “The Powers of Difference,” in *Future of Difference*, 91.

ful action.”<sup>33</sup> Lorde, however, grounds these insights not in German and French philosophy but in her own experiences and in the life-worlds of the black women, poor women, and lesbians she championed. Furthermore, contra Féral, Lorde did not lay claim to “absolute difference”—a position permanently outside general norms. Lorde sought, rather, to use her own nonidentical experiences to reflect critically on general norms—such as equality—and reconstitute our understanding of them, not outright abolish them.

Lorde uses the language of difference to balance the competing demands of (1) addressing *specific* struggles suffered by *specific* populations and (2) forging a *general* theoretical language that (a) connects them to wider social patterns and (b) provides a critical perspective on them. This is significant because—beyond being natural competitors—specificity and generality are often set against each other by partisans of identity politics on one side and of generalized theory on the other. Thinkers committed to attending to the social and historical experiences of the marginalized sing specificity’s praises and show an aversion to theoretical abstraction that loses specific sight of the marginalized. Thinkers committed to finding common sociological patterns across situations and populations abstract away from specificity in order to obtain the bird’s-eye view. It is easy to fall into the trap of viewing these two perspectives as mutually exclusive, as intellectually warring. Lorde avoids this trap by incorporating both. Seeing how Lorde does so requires us to disambiguate the four senses of difference and to understand their interrelationship.

### The First Sense of Difference: Pretext for Division and Domination

Lorde views differences in sex, sexuality, age, and “racial” appearance as regularly occurring phenomena—regular manifestations of intrinsic human diversity. Taking them for granted as givens, she has no account of either their sociohistorical emergence or of their metaphysical status. Lorde does have a theory, however, of these differences’ social and political significance. Against those who say that such differences are natural origins of division and domination, Lorde insists that such differences are politicized pretexts for division and domination. The process starts when Western European societies condition us “to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior.”<sup>34</sup> Out of these perceptual binaries come structures of domination.

Why do Western European societies use difference to sow division and institute domination? Lorde’s answer is Marxian in spirit: capitalist societies must create populations that see themselves as socially expendable. “In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must

33 Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” 37.

34 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 114.

always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior.”<sup>35</sup> These populations then sell their labor for less than its fair value out of (a) a degraded sense of their own worth and (b) a fear that they will not otherwise be able to survive. The result is not only the stigmatization of “surplus” populations but a generalized, “institutionalized rejection of difference”: as subjects of capitalism, “we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing.” We reflexively “handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate.”<sup>36</sup> Identification with the dominant, contempt for the subordinate, and institutionalized rejection of difference coemerge.

What are the implications of Lorde’s Marxian portrait of capitalism as the source of difference’s deformation into domination?<sup>37</sup> The first is obvious: for Lorde equality is, or ought to be, the baseline social norm. This is not surprising given how the equal dignity of selves is Lorde’s most basic commitment.<sup>38</sup> Lorde conceives of equality, to borrow from Elizabeth Anderson, not as a distribution of economic goods but as a form of “social relationship.” Negatively, this entails opposition to “oppression,” to relationships where “some people dominate, exploit, marginalize, demean, and inflict violence upon others.” Positively, relational equality means seeking “a social order in which persons stand in relations of equality,” who “live together in a democratic community, as opposed to a hierarchical one.”<sup>39</sup> The struggle for equality, Lorde argues, transforms the oppressed as they “reclaim” both their humanity and their rightful power to help set the “terms” of society.”<sup>40</sup> The struggle for equality also restores oppressors to truly

35 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 114. On Lorde’s particular concern about the increasing social expendability of black life in the Reagan years, see Laura Grattan, “Audre Lorde and the Poetics of Love: In the Movement for Black Lives,” in *American Political Thought: An Alternative View*, ed. Jonathan Keller and Alex Zamalin (New York: Routledge, 2017), 46.

36 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 115.

37 Grace Kyungwon Hong presses Lorde’s analysis of capitalism into a critique of “neoliberalism,” which Hong defines as “an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past.” Hong’s use of Lorde is true to her spirit, though it employs theoretical vocabulary (e.g., *neoliberalism*) that Lorde herself did not use and that did not circulate widely in Lorde’s time. *Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 7, 73–81.

38 Lebron also notes the crucial importance of equality for Lorde: “For Lorde, for one to avoid being stunted it was necessary for society to become genuinely and thoroughly egalitarian.” *Making of Black Lives Matter*, 90. On the surface, this makes it sound like social egalitarianism is a means to individual self-development. But as Lebron himself acknowledges, the claim to self-development in Lorde is egalitarian: she would not authorize aristocratic forms of self-development in which the subordination of some props up the flourishing of others. The right of the individual not to be “stunted” is secured only by her or his acknowledgment of a corresponding right to self-development for every other individual.

39 Elizabeth Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?,” *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 313.

40 “Sadomasochism,” 13.

human identity—for only within egalitarian social relations is such identity realizable. No one captures this logic better than Freire: “As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors’ power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression.”<sup>41</sup>

A second implication is that difference is neither a natural source of division nor an automatic cause of hierarchy. Though modern Western European societies have used difference as a pretext for dividing populations and establishing hierarchy, more positive uses are possible.

Lorde’s Marxian account of capitalism as an engine of division and domination is only half her portrait of difference in the first sense. The other half is her specification of various forms of rejecting difference. This specification is important because each of these forms has its own distinctive power irreducible to the others. Lorde charts three different forms of “institutionalized rejection of difference” in “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving” (1978):

Racism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance.*

Sexism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one sex and thereby the right to dominance.*

Heterosexism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance.*<sup>42</sup>

In “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” Lorde identifies “ageism” and “classism” as fourth and fifth forms of rejecting difference.<sup>43</sup> In *The Cancer Journals* (1980) and “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer” (1987), she suggests that social aversion to the ill or disabled is a sixth form.<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere, she names “anti-Semitism” and “xenophobia” as seventh and eighth forms.<sup>45</sup> It is beyond the scope of a single chapter

41 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 56.

42 Lorde, “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving,” in *Sister Outsider*, 45. That essay’s brief taxonomy of the ways we reject difference also includes “Homophobia: *The fear of feelings of love for members of one’s own sex and therefore hatred of those feelings in others.*” While “heterosexism” refers to beliefs regarding the superiority of heterosexual relationships, “homophobia” refers to feelings about one’s own and others’ same-sex desires. Only in the case of sexuality-based oppression did Lorde make such a categorical distinction between the cognitive and affective dimensions. I bracket homophobia from my reconstruction of Lorde’s specification of eight different axes of oppression since it replicates “heterosexism” as one of those eight. A more in-depth study of Lorde on the nature of sexuality-based oppression, however, would require an extended analysis of the distinction between “heterosexism” and “homophobia” and why it was important to her.

43 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 115.

44 Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, special ed. (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books [1980] 1997), 30; Lorde, “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer” (1987), in *Burst of Light*, 49–134.

45 Lorde, foreword to the English Edition of *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, in *I Am Your Sister*, 174, and Lorde, “Commencement Address: Oberlin College, May 29, 1989,” in *I Am Your Sister*, 216.

to provide a comprehensive interpretation of Lorde on each of these. Instead let me examine why Lorde thought specifying the different forms was important. An episode from her early political life is illustrative on this point.

One of Lorde's formative political experiences was her work for the Committee to Free the Rosenbergs.<sup>46</sup> The anticommunist hysteria surrounding the trial, conviction, and execution of Jules and Ethel Rosenberg for espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union was, in her young eyes, deeply menacing. Lorde observed the fear of the American state and feelings of unfreedom pervading New York leftist circles at that time: "Downtown at political meetings and uptown at the Harlem Writers Guild, friends, acquaintances, and simple people were terrorized at the thought of having to answer, 'Are you or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?'"<sup>47</sup> In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (1982), Lorde looked back on the day the Rosenbergs were executed—June 19, 1953—and reflected: "I walked away from the memorial rally . . . tears streaming down my face for them, for their sons, for all our wasted efforts, for myself—wondering whether there was any place . . . that could be safe and free, not really even sure of what being safe and free could mean."<sup>48</sup> American society's zeal in prosecuting the Rosenbergs and persecuting anyone remotely suspected of communism intensified Lorde's feelings of vulnerability in what she later called "the mouth of this dragon we call america."<sup>49</sup> At the same time, Lorde noted in *Zami* that the left-wing groups resisting anticommunist persecution could themselves be repressive: "I could imagine these comrades, Black and white, among whom color and racial differences could be openly examined and talked about, nonetheless one day asking me accusingly, 'Are you or have you ever been a member of a homo-

46 Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1982), 148. Interpreting *Zami* for the purposes of reconstructing Lorde's political thought is difficult because of its "biomythographical" genre. *Zami* blends traditional autobiography with the creative use of mythological figures designed to evoke ancestors, spiritual experiences, and dream-life; this merging of genres extends and deepens the author's reconstruction of herself beyond what a strictly empirical approach would allow. I guard against the danger of confusing the empirical with the mythological elements of *Zami*—and, admittedly, the two are sometimes indistinct—by cross-referencing the passages I take as empirical with De Veaux's biography of Lorde. The case of the Committee to Free the Rosenbergs is straightforward. The "facts" presented in *Zami* line up with the facts presented by De Veaux—facts grounded not only in De Veaux's own reading of *Zami* but also in interview and archival sources. It is therefore warranted to interpret Lorde's recollection of her experience with McCarthyism in *Zami* as rooted in real political experience and reflection, to interpret it in more or less the same way we would interpret it if it appeared in *Sister Outsider*. De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 43–45, 379. For two interpretations of *Zami* that grapple with the complexity of its genre, see Elizabeth Alexander, "'Coming Out Blackened and Whole': Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde's *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*," *American Literary History* 6, no. 4 (1994): 695–715, and Cheryl A. Wall, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), chap. 2.

47 Lorde, *Zami*, 149.

48 Lorde, *Zami*, 149.

49 Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" (1978), in *Sister Outsider*, 42.

sexual relationship?’ For them being gay was ‘bourgeois and reactionary,’ a reason for suspicion and shunning. Besides, it made you ‘more susceptible to the FBI.’”<sup>50</sup> Although Lorde’s left-wing social circles condemned class-based and race-based oppression, they did not see persecution on the basis of sexuality as a practice from which they should refrain. Lorde sensed the injustice of this discrepancy. In her later life she made sense of that discrepancy by connecting it to the larger pattern of oppression called “heterosexism.” Specification of this distinct form of oppression helped her identify its existence in mid-twentieth century-radical Left politics and mark it in *Zami* as a source of moral inconsistency and harm. Without this specification, the oppression might be lost in political analysis and the harm lost in moral accounting. Specification attunes us to varying sources of oppression and harm in complex political landscapes. This is especially necessary for left-wing social movements that in their rush to congratulate themselves on their struggle against one or two axes of oppression—class and race, for example—overlook their own practice of oppression along other lines: sex, sexuality, age, and disability.

Lorde’s insistence on specification targeted, in part, orthodox Marxists who reduce all oppression to class conflict: “The capitalist structure is a many-headed monster. . . . In no socialist country that I have visited have I found an absence of racism or sexism, so the eradication of both of these diseases seems to involve more than the abolition of capitalism as an institution.”<sup>51</sup> It also targeted members of the black freedom struggle reluctant to address sexism and center black women’s lives in political analysis: “Black women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women, and addressing those issues does not make us any less Black.”<sup>52</sup> It furthermore targeted upper-middle-class white feminists who acted as if they represented all women. White feminist consciousness-raising groups, for instance, did little “to articulate genuine differences between women, such as those of race, color, age, class, and sexual identity.” They felt no need “to examine the contradictions of self, woman as oppressor.”<sup>53</sup> Lorde’s insistence on specification, in sum, targeted all critical intellectuals who tried to reduce social injustice to one or two axes of oppression. The simultaneous existence of—by her count—eight or more axes made such a quest futile.

Lorde’s insistence on specification, however, does not commit her to abandoning generalization. She sees both specification and generalization as necessary to analyzing oppression and treats them as poles between which she must tack. Sometimes, for instance, Lorde reintegrates her analyses of the various forms of rejecting difference into a unifying trope. Such reintegration shows commonalities

50 Lorde, *Zami*, 149. Cf. De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 45.

51 Lorde, “Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface,” in *Sister Outsider*, 64.

52 Lorde, “Sexism,” 60.

53 Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (1981), in *Sister Outsider*, 130.



among the forms while still respecting distinctions between them. Lorde's idea of the "mythical norm" is a sterling example of such reintegration: "Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows 'that is not me.' In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society."<sup>54</sup> "Mythical norm" refers to society's most hegemonic subject position—the subject position against which all others measure their own deviance and imperfection. In America, this norm has particular markers: "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure." Yet the return of the particular in Lorde's illustration of the "mythical norm" registers that norm's generality—for as soon as Lorde says "in America," she implies that (a) other societies have their own mythical norms and (b) those norms may be differently marked in those societies. Notice also how Lorde's identification of the particular markers of the American mythical norm evokes by association the particular markers of their deviant doubles: black, fat, female, old, homosexual, non-Christian, and financially insecure. Lorde's general trope of the "mythical norm" thus implicates the specific forms of rejecting difference, helping us see how all "deviant" social positions in the United States nevertheless connect to a particular image of power—an image that corresponds to the identities of power holders in the United States, and an image that has a spectral presence in the minds of the powerless. The specific and the general interact dynamically in Lorde's explication of the "mythical norm," as they do in her entire political thought.

### **The Second Sense of Difference: Differentiation in Group Experience and Perspective**

The second sense of difference in Lorde is differentiation in group experience and perspective: "certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex."<sup>55</sup> Regularly recurring differences in racial, generational, and sexual embodiment are not by themselves the substance of these "very real differences." The substance is, rather, the different social experiences these different embodiments produce: prejudices and privileges, segregated life worlds and conflicting historical perspectives.<sup>56</sup>

The second sense of difference in some respects resembles the idea of group-differentiated standpoint central to feminist standpoint theory: it assumes that different social positions produce distinct clusters of experience that in turn pro-

<sup>54</sup> Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 116.

<sup>55</sup> Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 115.

<sup>56</sup> On racially segregated "life-worlds," see Michael C. Dawson, "After the Deluge: Publics and Politics in Katrina's Wake," *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 1 (2006): 239–49.

duce distinct bodies of knowledge.<sup>57</sup> Unlike Nancy Hartsock, however, Lorde never pressed her observation of group-differentiated social perspectives into a full-fledged epistemological theory, nor did Lorde ever claim that subjugated groups were—as a general matter—intellectually advantaged in their understanding of social reality (though she acknowledged that they were often more insightful in particular cases). As I will demonstrate later, Lorde also gave more weight than most standpoint theorists to individual perspective, the distinct intuitions and perceptions of particular people. Lorde's second sense of difference thus stops short of a standpoint theoretical claim.

Lorde illustrates her second sense of difference in an extended comparison of the situations of white and black women at the dawn of the age of Reagan: "Today, with the defeat of the ERA, the tightening economy, and increased conservatism, it is easier once again for white women to believe the dangerous fantasy that if you are good enough, pretty enough, sweet enough, quiet enough, teach the children to behave, hate the right people, and marry the right men, then you will be allowed to co-exist with patriarchy in relative peace, at least until a man needs your job or the neighborhood rapist happens along."<sup>58</sup> Black women, however, have never been able to afford such a dangerous fantasy of peace with white capitalist patriarchy: "Black women and our children know the fabric of our lives is stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest."<sup>59</sup> Differential susceptibility to violence, in fact, is a major racial fault line in American women's experience. White failure to acknowledge and address this fault line is partly why interracial women's solidarity is so difficult to achieve: "Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying."<sup>60</sup>

The violence is not only physical but also symbolic and "weaves through the daily tissues of [black] living."<sup>61</sup> In "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" (1981), Lorde shows how white women can themselves be the agents of symbolic violence and therefore create racial division: "I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a supermarket in Eastchester in 1967, and a little white girl riding past in her mother's cart calls out excitedly, 'Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid!' And your mother shushes you, but she does not correct

57 For the classic formulation, see Nancy Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited, and Other Essays* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), chap. 6. For a black feminist variation, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (orig. 2000; New York: Routledge, 2009), chap. 11.

58 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 119.

59 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 119.

60 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 119. Cf. Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 20–21.

61 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 119.

you.”<sup>62</sup> The opposing perspectives of the black mother and white mother illustrate the racial divide. Whereas the black mother experiences the moment as a painful episode of social devaluation—as well as a reminder of how race condemns her and her child to ongoing social devaluation—the white mother experiences it as a social embarrassment, an unintended revelation of the racially hierarchical imagery her child absorbs in their home.<sup>63</sup> Whereas the black mother experiences the moment as one requiring attention and correction, the white mother experiences it as one requiring circumvention and forgetting. The interactive structure is of black pain and white unaccountability. Their shared identity as women does not dissolve the asymmetry.

Lorde’s lifelong experience of such asymmetry leads her not to reject solidarity with white women but rather to insist that it be forged through truthful conversation—“the hard work of excavating honesty”—about racism in women’s communities.<sup>64</sup> This will require black and white women to work through not only intellectual differences in their understandings of racism but also affective differences in their responses to it. “The Uses of Anger” is a masterwork in the elucidation of the ways that different affective responses to racism differentiate racial communities. “My response to racism is anger,” Lorde writes. “I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life.”<sup>65</sup> Lorde is careful *not* to suggest that only black women are angry, that no white women feel anger. On the contrary, she writes, “*Every woman* has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being.”<sup>66</sup> Lorde nevertheless notes racial divisions within second-wave feminism in norms surrounding the expression and reception of anger, especially about racism: all too often interracial conversations break down the minute black women voice anger and white women get defensive in the face of it. This suggests that second-wave feminists must collectively develop the art of expressing, interpreting, and using anger in the service of political struggle.

Lorde charts a path for women to collectively metabolize anger by showing that it is possible to listen and learn from anger without feeling attacked and immobilized by it. She models a politically productive response to anger in her own

62 Lorde, “Uses of Anger,” 126.

63 For a systematic analysis of racism as social devaluation, see Christopher J. Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 2. For discussion of Lorde’s rage against the “white world’s devaluation of blackness,” see Margaret Kissam Morris, “Audre Lorde: Textual Authority and the Embodied Self,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23, no. 1 (2002): 169.

64 Lorde, “Uses of Anger,” 128. As Hong observes, Lorde “demands” that her readers “take into account our own complicities with power over and against others.” *Death beyond Disavowal*, 5.

65 Lorde, “Uses of Anger,” 124.

66 Lorde, “Uses of Anger,” 127. Emphasis added.

reflection on the need for black women to listen and learn from other women of color:

When I speak of women of Color, I do not only mean Black women. The woman of Color who is not Black and who charges me with rendering her invisible by assuming that her struggles with racism are identical with my own has something to tell me that I had better learn from, lest we both waste ourselves fighting the truths between us. If I participate, knowingly or otherwise, in my sister's oppression and she calls me on it, to answer her anger with my own only blankets the substance of our exchange with reaction. It wastes energy.<sup>67</sup>

When a woman at the margins expresses anger toward a woman at (or closer to) the center, the latter must tell herself—as Lorde does—that the former “has something to tell me that I had better learn from.” By relinquishing habits of defensiveness and preoccupations with guilt, women can turn moments of fear into moments of clarification.<sup>68</sup> As Lorde says directly to her white woman reader, “My anger and your attendant fears are spotlights that can be used for growth . . . Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures.”<sup>69</sup>

Lorde's reflections on anger as an intragroup and intergroup experience reveal the emotional charge of the second sense of difference. Experiential and perspectival differences are occasions for anger and frustration insofar as they are sources of misunderstanding and mistreatment and hamper communication. At the same time, Lorde is quick to insist that experiential and perspectival differences need not be sources of misunderstanding and mistreatment, nor need they hamper communication: “It is not [the] differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.”<sup>70</sup> Because it is the “refusal to recognize” differences and “to examine the distortions” that result from “mislaming” them that is the real source of separation, the act of recognizing differences and examining those distortions is a path to reconciliation. Grappling with difference—and with

67 Lorde, “Uses of Anger,” 127–28.

68 Cf. Sina Kramer, *Excluded Within: The (Un)intelligibility of Radical Political Actors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 186–87.

69 Lorde, “Uses of Anger,” 124. For three helpful discussions of Lorde on the uses of anger, see Susan Bickford, “Anti-anti-identity Politics: Feminism, Democracy, and the Complexities of Citizenship,” *Hypatia* 12, no. 4 (1997): 125–26; Denise James, “In Support of the Girls from 'Round Here: Black Feminist Reflections on the Utility of Rage for Building Communities of Support,” in *Communities of Peace: Confronting Injustice and Creating Justice* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2012), 57–59, 61; and Bromell, *Time Is Always Now*, 33.

70 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 115.

the challenge of interpreting it responsibly—thus becomes a politically creative act that forges new relationships. Lorde speaks directly to the creative power of working through difference: “The angers of women can transform difference through insight into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth.”<sup>71</sup> Here difference in the second sense—differentiation in group experience and perspective—becomes difference in the third sense: a site of personal and political growth. The keys to this transformation are (a) collective communication about the differences that cause division and (b) willingness to experience the pain and discomfort attending such communication. The prospect of growth, however, can motivate this process. We expose the “differences between us” in the hope that they will become “creative.”<sup>72</sup>

### The Third Sense of Difference: Site of Personal and Political Growth

The third sense of difference is difference as a site of personal and political growth. Lorde frequently frames difference as a raw material for creativity, as an occasion for imaginative response. In “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1979), she writes, “Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.”<sup>73</sup> The term *necessary polarities* suggests that Lorde sees contradiction as intrinsic to human societies, maybe even human life. Social and value pluralism, however, need not paralyze us with indecision or send us on a futile search for a social or philosophical monism that represses difference. Instead we can respond to “necessary polarities” by moving between them inventively, by living with contradiction in free and joyful ways.

In society and politics especially, difference can be the occasion for “mutual stretching” and hence mutual growth.<sup>74</sup> One place where Lorde’s thinking on the politically creative potentials of difference comes out in sharp relief is in her reflections on coalition building. On the one hand, Lorde acknowledges that the day-to-day work of coalition building is “tedious” and “unromantic.” As she writes in “Learning from the 60s” (1982), “Militancy no longer means guns at high noon, if it ever did. It means actively working for change, sometimes in the absence of any surety that change is coming. It means doing the unromantic and tedious work necessary to forge meaningful coalitions, and it means recognizing which coalitions are possible and which coalitions are not.”<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, Lorde argues for a more egalitarian practice of women’s organizing—one that

71 Lorde, “Uses of Anger,” 131.

72 Lorde, “Uses of Anger,” 131.

73 Lorde, “Master’s Tools,” 111.

74 Lorde, “I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing across Sexualities,” in *Burst of Light*, 20.

75 Lorde, “Learning from the 60s,” in *Sister Outsider*, 142.

more effectively builds coalition between women of different races, sexualities, and classes—by emphasizing the collective strength to be gained from proper acknowledgment of difference. When difference is viewed as a resource instead of a hazard, “the necessity for interdependency” becomes “unthreatening”: “Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.”<sup>76</sup>

In “I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing across Sexualities,” Lorde makes a two-pronged case for organizing across difference. First she makes a *negative* case, suggesting that failure to address internal differences—namely, in this example, differences in sexuality—weakens black women’s struggle. “One accusation that seems to render even the most vocal straight Black woman totally silent and ineffective,” Lorde observes, “is the suggestion that she might be a Black Lesbian”:

If someone says you’re Russian and you know you’re not, you don’t collapse into stunned silence. Even if someone calls you a bigamist, or a childbeater, and you know you’re not, you don’t crumple into bits. . . . But let anyone, particularly, a Black man, accuse a straight Black woman of being a Black *Lesbian*, and right away that sister becomes immobilized. . . . That is homophobia. It is a waste of woman energy, and it puts a terrible weapon into the hands of your enemies to be used against you to silence you, to keep you docile and in line. It also serves to keep us isolated and apart.<sup>77</sup>

The failure of straight black women to grapple with homophobia perpetuates the power of the term *lesbian* to stun, silence, and keep straight and lesbian black women out of coalition. This undermines black women’s collective political capacity by sowing unnecessary division and wasting “woman energy.” Straight and lesbian black women, however, do not coequally share responsibility for healing this division. That responsibility, Lorde insists, rests primarily with straight black women: “Homophobia and heterosexism mean you allow yourselves to be robbed of the sisterhood and strength of Black Lesbian women because you are afraid of being call a Lesbian yourself.”<sup>78</sup> The party harboring this irrational fear is the party responsible for expunging it. Straight black women must bear the burden of per-

76 Lorde, “Master’s Tools,” 111. Cf. Olson, “Liabilities of Language.”

77 Lorde, “I Am Your Sister,” 21–22. Barbara Smith offered a theory of why the charge of lesbianism was so immobilizing for black women: “Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining ‘straightness’ is our last resort.” “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977), in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, 2nd ed., ed. Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith (orig. 1982; New York: Feminist, 2015), 171.

78 Lorde, “I Am Your Sister,” 24.

forming the self-examination and initiating the self-transformation necessary to reconcile themselves with their lesbian sisters (and in the process, with their own same-sex desires):<sup>79</sup> “Just as racist stereotypes are the problem of the white people who believe them, so also are homophobic stereotypes the problem of the heterosexuals who believe them. . . . Those stereotypes are yours to solve, not mine.”<sup>80</sup>

The negative case for organizing across difference, however, sets up a *positive* case. That positive case centers on difference’s “creative function” in the practice of coalition.<sup>81</sup> If straight black women can relinquish their stereotypes of black lesbians and open the way to organizational alliance, the “strengths” of lesbian and straight black women will become “available to each other.”<sup>82</sup> Coalition across sexualities, Lorde hopes, will birth a process of mutual learning that will enhance the knowledge and power of all involved. In “I Am Your Sister,” she insists, “Black women are not one great vat of homogenized chocolate milk. We have many different faces. . . . We do not have to become each other’s unique experiences and insights in order to share what we have learned through our particular battles for survival as Black women.”<sup>83</sup> Lesbian and straight black women have had to employ different strategies to survive white capitalist patriarchy; within coalition, they may share those strategies for mutual benefit. Coalition permits the synthesis of political knowledge—“learning how to take our differences and make them strengths.”<sup>84</sup>

Against the background of her thinking on the creative potentials of coalition, we can make better sense of Lorde’s contention that difference is politically generative. Recall her claim that “only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.”<sup>85</sup> When different oppressed groups come together and work through their differences on terms of equality, they open the way to identifying shared challenges and charting courses of collaborative action. This is not to say that the process of coalition building is conflict free. As Lorde’s contemporary Bernice Johnson Reagon stressed, “*Really* doing coalition work” often means feeling that you’re “gonna keel over any minute and die. . . . Most of the time you feel

79 After all, homophobia is, by Lorde’s definition, “a terror surrounding feelings of love for members of the same sex and thereby a hatred of those feelings in others.” Lorde, “I Am Your Sister,” 20; cf. Lorde, “Scratching the Surface,” 45. Overcoming hatred of those feelings in others requires overcoming hatred of those feelings in oneself.

80 Lorde, “I Am Your Sister,” 25–26. Cf. Byrd, “Create Your Own Fire,” 15–17.

81 Lorde, “Master’s Tools,” 111.

82 Lorde, “I Am Your Sister,” 20.

83 Lorde, “I Am Your Sister,” 19, 26.

84 Lorde, “Master’s Tools,” 112. Cf. Byrd, “Create Your Own Fire,” 27. Young has an entire chapter called “Social Difference as a Political Resource” in *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chap. 3. Though there is no mention of Lorde in that book, it is hard to imagine that Young did not draw inspiration from Lorde in her pursuit of this line of thought.

85 Lorde, “Master’s Tools,” 111.

threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing."<sup>86</sup> Yet Lorde thought that the "hard work of excavating honesty" at the heart of coalition work built an intracoalitional trust conducive to effective political action.<sup>87</sup> Such intracoalitional trust enables deep political inquiry, far-reaching deliberation, and clear-eyed objective setting; these together increase the likelihood that the coalition will materially affect the world: "Within that interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being."<sup>88</sup> In sum, the mutual growth stimulated by difference enhances the power of coalitions to act politically. Perhaps this is why Lorde illustrates difference's "creative function" with images of political freedom: seeking "new ways of being in the world," acting "where there are no charters."<sup>89</sup>

Lorde concludes her explanation of difference's creative potential with a move from the political to the personal: "Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged."<sup>90</sup> The sentence figures difference primarily as connection—the point of encounter between self and other where learning, and sometimes change, takes place. As the sentence moves toward its conclusion, its focus shifts to the singular self: wrestling with difference enhances not just the coalition's political power but also the self's "personal power." This indicates that Lorde sees the growth stimulated by difference as not just political but also personal, not just collective but also individual. Are the personal transformations catalyzed by difference simply means to a better world, or are they also ends in themselves? The fourth sense of difference in Lorde—difference as a marker of individuality—suggests that Lorde sees such personal growth not just as a political means but also as an ethical end. What is the substance of Lorde's individualism?

#### The Fourth Sense of Difference: Marker of Individuality

The fourth sense of difference appears in several texts where Lorde emphasizes the need for political and social movements to respect members' individuality.

<sup>86</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (orig. 1983; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 343. In a 1983 interview with Susan Cavin, Lorde expressed admiration for this specific insight by Reagon. *Conversations*, 104. For Barbara Smith's reflections on coalition as a black feminist practice, see her introduction to *Home Girls*, xxxv.

<sup>87</sup> Lorde, "Uses of Anger," 128.

<sup>88</sup> Lorde, "Master's Tools," 111.

<sup>89</sup> Lorde, "Master's Tools," 111. The connection Lorde suggests here between initiative taking, freedom, and political action bears an obvious resemblance to the political theory of Hannah Arendt, but I have found no evidence either that Lorde read Arendt or that Arendt read Lorde. For a discussion of Lorde as a theorist of nonsovereign freedom, see Lida Maxwell, "The Pleasure(s) of Freedom," *Theory & Event* 23, no. 1 (2020): 211–12.

<sup>90</sup> Lorde, "Master's Tools," 112.



The theme of individuality, in other words, emerges in Lorde within a particular “problem-space”: how to reconcile the self’s difference and integrity with oppressed populations’ need for group coalition and solidarity.<sup>91</sup> Rather than pretend that there is no tension between these conflicting demands, Lorde addresses the tension head on. “You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other,” she reflects in “Learning from the 60s.” “I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities. And in order to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness.”<sup>92</sup> “Differences” in the final sentence refers unmistakably to individual-level variety. Distinctions between individuals, Lorde argues, are ethically salient and require careful attention and acknowledgment. Lorde frames individuality not as an obstacle to coalition but rather as a source of creative power. She calls on her audience—in this instance, the black students in the Harvard audience before whom she gave “Learning from the 60s” as a talk in 1982, and the women of color who formed *Sister Outsider*’s primary reading public—to commit themselves to a shared future of egalitarian inclusiveness that treats the plurality of individual identities as a political resource.<sup>93</sup>

Lorde is aware that attempts to transform individual differences into positive group strengths will not always be successful. Sometimes coalition members will have to settle on a *modus vivendi*, suspending disagreements on certain matters for the sake of pursuing greater goals. Lorde’s statement that “we must *allow* each other our differences” betrays her realism.<sup>94</sup> To *allow* each other differences is to practice tolerance and forbearance, rather than to embrace and celebrate. Tolerance and forbearance lack affective positivity; they are ho-hum democratic practices. They are nevertheless *necessary* democratic practices, for they enable parties to disagree while still cooperating on common goals. Tolerance and forbearance help create and maintain coalition across disagreement. They furthermore buy time for coalitions to come to deeper agreement when possible.

The fourth sense of difference also comes through in an on-camera interview

91 On the idea of “problem-space,” see David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Post-coloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5–9; Brandon M. Terry, “Requiem for a Dream: The Problem-Space of Black Power,” in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 293; and Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 77.

92 Lorde, “Learning from the 60s,” 142.

93 As Olson perceptively observes, Lorde “emphasizes that relational practices are more fundamental than categories of people, because such categories are inevitably inadequate to represent the complexity of any individual’s experience, and because a focus upon relationships may enable people of diverse backgrounds to cooperate in coalition politics to achieve mutual objectives.” “Liabilities of Language,” 450.

94 Emphasis added.

in the documentary film *Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (1996): "One of the lessons that I think the sixties needs to teach us is that liberation is not the private province of any one particular group. We are individuals. We are particular people. And we have differences that we can use, that we need to recognize, identify and use in our common goals, in our common struggles."<sup>95</sup> On the one hand, the primary subject of the statement is liberation, which we should understand as a coalitional project among multiple overlapping groups: women, black folk, gays and lesbians, the poor, the ill and disabled. In this respect the statement's emphasis is trans-individual. On the other hand, Lorde's language of "individuals" and "particular people" is emphatic. So when Lorde says, "We have differences that we can use," we may confidently infer that she means not only differences between identity groups but also differences between individuals. The two—in fact—are mutually constitutive. One way identity groups emerge is when individuals who share a common oppression come together, communicate about that oppression, and forge a language expressing their identity as an oppressed group. In an address titled "Survival" delivered at the second National Conference of Afro-American Writers at Howard University in 1976, Lorde defined *peoplehood* in such individualistic terms: "'A people' is a group of individuals who share some part of their mutual self-definition."<sup>96</sup> Individuals, of course, draw on inherited traditions and surrounding cultures to forge new articulations of group identity. But though these new articulations are indebted to the old, they still reflect the agency of the individuals who transform the old into the new.<sup>97</sup>

Attributing to Lorde a commitment to individuality is controversial because of the contentious status of individualism in feminism. In "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory" (1984), for example, bell hooks worries that liberal individualism "has permeated feminist thought to such an extent that it undermines the potential radicalism of feminist struggle": "Any movement to resist the cooptation of feminist struggle must begin by introducing a different feminist perspective—a new theory—one that is not informed by the ideology of liberal individualism."<sup>98</sup> In his overview of African American political ideologies, Michael Dawson characterizes black feminism generally as anti-individualist: "Both those who adopt the term *black feminists* and those who prefer *womanist* believe that [their] concern

95 Ada Gay Griffin, Michelle Parkerson, Holly Fisher, and Larry Banks, *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (1996; repr., New York: Third World Newsreel, 2006), DVD, 25:29–26:03. Cf. Deborah Wood's 1976 interview with Lorde, in *In the Memory and Spirit of Frances, Zora, and Lorraine: Essays and Interviews on Black Women and Writing*, ed. Juliette Bowles (Washington, DC: Institute for the Arts and the Humanities, Howard University, 1979), 19–20.

96 Lorde, "Survival," April 1976, Audre Lorde Papers, Box 18, Folder 2.1.115, Spelman College Archives.

97 For Lorde's view of personal agency, see her 1983 interview with Cavin, in *Conversations*, 105.

98 bell hooks, "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory," in *Words of Fire*, 276.

with eliminating all oppressions and the emphasis on community necessitate a more communal approach [to politics] that rejects the liberal individualism of the dominant society.”<sup>99</sup> In the case of Iris Marion Young’s feminist politics of difference, she maintains that it opposes liberal individualism, which she characterizes as difference-effacing and “incommensurate” with a social structural analysis of oppression.<sup>100</sup>

The particular variety of “liberal individualism” that hooks, Dawson, and Young identify as antagonistic to feminist struggle is an atomistic, competitive form hostile to the assertion of group difference. The critique by hooks, in fact, is directly indebted to Zillah Eisenstein’s 1981 book *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, where Eisenstein suggests that it is not individuality generally that is the enemy but rather the very specific variety of “competitive, atomistic” liberal individualism that emerged in the modern industrial West.<sup>101</sup> Eisenstein grants, in other words, that other figurations of the individual are possible. In the very passage that hooks quotes, in fact, Eisenstein calls for a “conscious differentiation” between “the ideology of individualism that assumes a competitive view of the individual” and “a theory of individuality that recognizes the importance of the individual within the social collectivity.”<sup>102</sup>

In previous work I have shown that such a theory of individuality recognizing “the importance of the individual within the social collectivity” is already present in African American political thought. Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin all exemplify a *democratic individualism* that is acutely aware of the social preconditions of individual flourishing and hence is militantly opposed to the racial stratification and structural injustice that impede such flourishing.<sup>103</sup> Audre Lorde’s individualism resembles the democratic individualism of Douglass, Ellison, and Baldwin, but with one key difference. More than Douglass, Ellison, and even Baldwin, Lorde figures the self as relational, as individualized through complex, dialogical interaction.<sup>104</sup> She is more sensitive to the

99 Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 139. Patricia Hill Collins, however, introduces a crucial qualification. Like Dawson, she sees black feminism as hostile to competitive, atomistic forms of individualism. But in “Black women’s community work” she nevertheless finds a strong ethic of what she calls “socially responsible individualism.” Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 205; cf. 282–83.

100 Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 229, 39.

101 Zillah R. Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (New York: Longman, 1981), 5, quoted in hooks, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory,” 276.

102 hooks, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory,” 276. Cf. Eisenstein, *Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, 114, 146, 153–54.

103 Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). See also Turner, “Baldwin’s Individualism and Critique of Property,” in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan McWilliams (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 301–33.

104 On the idea of the self-in-relation, see Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 33.

ways parents, ancestors, friends, strangers, lovers, children—even landscapes, cityscapes, seascapes—all educe and shape the self, over and against conscious will and intention. At the same time, Lorde characterizes mutually related selves as meaningfully “separate”; hence she figures them as “individual.”<sup>105</sup> To register the distinctiveness of Lorde’s individualism, I will call it *relational democratic individualism*, or *relational individualism* for short.<sup>106</sup>

In “Survival” Lorde shows a complex understanding of the dialectical relationship between individuals and groups in the politics of liberation. Her targets in this address are prominent black writers who profess concern for “the survival of ‘our people.’”<sup>107</sup> She finds among these writers a will to impose “literary, social, and professional death” on any alternative black voice who exemplifies a nonconforming idea of blackness.<sup>108</sup> Though she is not specific about which nonconforming ideas of blackness she thinks are threatened, it is reasonable to infer that black feminists, black gays and lesbians, and black people partnered with nonblacks are among those she has in mind. Lorde addresses the harm of racial policing *not* through an enumeration of the specific subgroups it marginalizes but *rather* through a defense of black individuals’ right to live out their own individual ways of being black. She voices this right in an individualistic first-person singular: “I am a black woman, a poet, a mother. I am not a Birch tree. I am not a jewel. I am me, and I have a right to be different.”<sup>109</sup> She also calls for blacks as a group to endorse the right of each black individual to affirm herself in her individual identity—an identity that may be internally plural but is nevertheless bound to a singular “I” that can exercise agency in self-definition: “We cannot love ‘our people’ unless we love each of us ourselves, unless I love each piece of myself,

105 Lorde, “Survival,” Lorde Papers; Lorde, “Learning from the 60s,” 142.

106 I borrow the term *relational individualism* from Nancy J. Chodorow, though I graft it onto my account of democratic individualism first developed in *Awakening to Race*. Chodorow first used the term in “Toward a Relational Individualism: The Mediation of Self through Psychoanalysis,” in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 154–62. Space does not permit me to put my account of democratic individualism, or of Lorde’s relational individualism, into dialogue with Chodorow’s rich object-relations theory of self-formation. But I do plan to stage such a dialogue in a separate essay at a future date. Lorde’s relational individualism bears some resemblance to Jennifer Nedelsky’s conception of relational autonomy, which she defines as “a capacity to engage in the ongoing, interactive creation of our selves—our relational selves, our selves that are constituted, yet not determined, by the web of nested relations within which we live. We have the capacity to interact creatively, that is, in an undetermined way with all the relationships that shape us—and thus to reshape, re-create, both the relationships and ourselves.” Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law’s Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45. Lorde, however, places greater emphasis than Nedelsky on individuals’ existential separateness even as she fully acknowledges their social, political, and biological interconnection. Lorde’s relational self is also more agonistically self-assertive than Nedelsky’s, which is why we can say that it part of a fuller-blown commitment to individualism.

107 Lorde, “Survival,” Lorde Papers.

108 Lorde, “Survival.” Cf. Claudia Tate’s 1982 interview with Lorde, in *Conversations*, 85–86.

109 Lorde, “Survival.”

those I wish to keep and those I wish to change—for survival is the ability to encompass difference, to encompass change without destruction.”<sup>110</sup>

The final clause of this last sentence is tantalizingly ambiguous. Is Lorde referring to collective or individual survival? If the former, then the claim is that the survival of blacks as a group depends on their ability to encompass the nonconforming and changing subjectivities of the group’s individual members. Unless blacks accommodate different ways of being black, then they will lose the strength in numbers that makes racial solidarity effective in the first place. If the latter, the claim is that the survival of any individual self depends on its ability to encompass newly emergent parts of the self into an “I” that is continuous over time. Difference here refers to change within an individual—a change perhaps stimulated by others, but a change nevertheless incorporated into the self in at least some accordance with the agent’s reflection and desire. When Lorde refers to her own will to “love each piece of myself, those I wish to keep and those I wish to change,” she assumes a degree of agency in the process of self-definition, for she assumes the susceptibility of her self to preservation or change according to decision. Even as she acknowledges that the raw materials of the self are historically and socially given, Lorde insists that the individual can work on those materials—molding them, shaping them, creatively expressing them, shifting some to the foreground, others to the background—in an ongoing work of self-fashioning.<sup>111</sup>

The final element of “Survival” worth noting is a remarkable sentence concerning the self’s existential solitude: “Collective love is well and good, but we thrive and die one at a time.”<sup>112</sup> Lorde here figures both flourishing and mortality as experientially individual, justifying her recentering of political attention on the diversity of black individualities.<sup>113</sup> On the grounds of the self’s existential separateness, Lorde argues that black solidarity must coexist with group commitment to the autonomy and agency of black individuals. Here the relational dimension of Lorde’s individualism comes more sharply into view: more than any atomistic individualist, Lorde acknowledges that the security of individual rights depends on the political power of groups. Because society’s most powerful members are consistently secure in the enjoyment of their rights, and because their power as a group is built into the basic structure of society—so much so that it becomes

110 Lorde, “Survival,” As Morris writes, Lorde presumes “that the entire bio/psychological/spiritual being must be recognized as always already multiple yet one in its desire to be, and in being, to speak.” “Audre Lorde: Textual Authority and the Embodied Self,” 181. Cf. Byrd, “Create Your Own Fire,” 25.

111 On the dialectical relationship between politically resistant group identities and the diverse individualities co-constituting them, and on the central role of agency in this relationship, see Sharon R. Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

112 Lorde, “Survival.”

113 Lorde reiterates this existentially individualist sentiment in a 1976 interview with Nina Winter: “I think we are all very much alone and very unlike anyone else.” *Conversations*, 9.

invisible—these citizens fancy themselves self-reliant individuals whose freedom does not depend on group solidarity, even though it does in fact depend on the solidarity that the powerful engage in whenever they cooperate to maintain the status quo. Marginalized groups—such as black Americans—never have the luxury of believing that the security of their rights as individuals can dispense with the political power they realize through group solidarity. “Survival” forthrightly acknowledges this dependence of individual rights on group power. At the same time, Lorde insists that group power should ultimately be the servant of individual flourishing, not vice versa. Individual sacrifices may be necessary in the course of securing the group power that in turn secures individual flourishing. But individual flourishing must remain the end, group power the means to that end. Lorde’s relational individualism provides grounds for group solidarity, but group solidarity bound by respect for the agency and autonomy of each of the group’s members: “Until each one of us here can love herself and himself in all our contradictions, we can never really survive as a people because we can never survive as individuals. For we are a people at war, and that war must be fought by separate individuals coming together to move against our common enemy.”<sup>114</sup> Or, as she says in “Learning from the 60s,” “Coalition, like unity, means the coming together of whole, self-actualized human beings, not fragmented automatons marching to a prescribed step.”<sup>115</sup>

### Conclusion: Difference and Relational Equality

After disambiguating the four senses of difference in Lorde, the (admittedly scholastic) question arises: why does she use one term for these four distinct phenomena, when if she used four distinct terms her meaning would be clearer?

Lorde uses the one term to underscore the ubiquity of difference in all its varieties and to accentuate their close interrelation. Generic differences in skin tone, reproductive organs, and patterns of loving—among others—become pretexts for imposing social divisions and hierarchies (sense 1). Over time, these social divisions and hierarchies produce distinct groups of people—differentiated by socio-political experience and perspective (sense 2). Creating coalition among these groups requires communicating across difference and turning it into a site of mutual growth (sense 3). Through it all, the groups are still home to individuals—individuals who belong to multiple groups concurrently, who sometimes feel

<sup>114</sup> Lorde, “Survival.”

<sup>115</sup> Lorde, “Learning from the 60s,” 142. See also the 1976 interview with Winter, where Lorde says, “Sometimes I look at groups of people, and this phrase ‘Twilight Sleep’ comes to mind. It is what happens to a system, to a movement, as soon as the people in it begin to believe in the movement more than in the individual. When you have individuals believing that you can start with the movement first and *then* the people, or that liberation belongs to one private group, then you have people moving en masse through their pain in a twilight sleep. . . . *I choose to be awake.*” Emphasis in the original. *Conversations*, 17.

alienated from all of them, who are each more than the sum of their group affiliations (sense 4).<sup>116</sup>

In the course of the writing, the significance and power of the word *difference* grows, making increasingly strong claims on the reader's attention. In this manner Lorde trains her reader to notice difference in all its forms, to see it as deserving of engagement. This is not to say that Lorde encourages her reader to value difference in all its forms. When it is the occasion for division and domination, when it demarcates different sociohistorical groups with different susceptibilities to violence and premature death, we may rightfully feel anger, sorrow, and regret. Such tragic history in the modern West nevertheless gave birth to vibrant forms of group identity and culture that contain wisdom worthy of being shared across cultures. These multiple facets of difference always deserve attention, sometimes deserve celebration, and other times deserve criticism. Lorde's relationship to difference, in this respect, is ambivalent. But this ambivalence is itself a mark of her interpretive sophistication—of, in Ralph Ellison's words, “a complex double vision, a fluid, ambivalent response to men [*sic*] and events which represents, at its finest, a profoundly civilized adjustment to the cost of being human in this modern world.”<sup>117</sup>

Lorde's varying evaluations of difference, in other words, reveal her commitment to suspending judgment before each new appearance of difference, to interpreting each on its own terms before deciding how to appraise it. She stays open to being surprised by difference—to being sometimes delighted by it, sometimes dismayed by it, sometimes perplexed by it, sometimes indifferent. In so doing,

116 Cf. Michael Hanchard: “People are almost always more than the identities they project and emphasize in the world, much in the way that they are never fully represented in either positive or negative forms of identification.” “Contours of Black Political Thought: An Introduction and Perspective,” *Political Theory* 38, no. 4 (2010): 525.

117 Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug” (1963/1964), in *Shadow and Act* (1964), in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 178. For a critical analysis of Ellison's masculinist tendency to represent humanity through the figures of “man” and “men,” see Turner, *Awakening to Race*, 84–86. Ellison biographer Arnold Rampersad maintains that Ellison was “indifferent” toward black women writers. It therefore seems odd that I use Ellison's words to describe Lorde's interpretive sophistication. I stand by this choice, however, for two reasons. First, the two recorded times Lorde spoke of Ellison, her words were positive. Lorde said that Ellison's work powerfully represented a “particularly African” form of transcendence: “not a turning away from pain, from error, but seeing these things as part of living and learning from them.” Second, Ellison's formulation “fluid, ambivalent response” uniquely encapsulates Lorde's approach to difference. Ellison's use of the controversial term *civilized* is a deliberate inversion of the modern West's savagery-civilization discourse. Ellison is saying that it precisely those on the underside of modern Western history who learned—in a hard-won way—“what it took to live in the world with others.” By teaching how to live with, and learn from, what at first appears strange, Lorde's politics of difference also addresses what it takes “to live in the world with others.” Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 547; interview of Audre Lorde by Mari Evans (1979), in *Conversations*, 77; interview of Audre Lorde by Claudia Tate (1982), in *Conversations*, 97; Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 574.

she indirectly suggests that we be similarly open: such openness measures our aliveness, our receptivity, to the world's unpredictability.

Lorde's four senses of difference—evoking historically tragic experiences, unjustifiable inequalities, invaluable traditions of learning, the majesty of individual agency—impart to the reader a multidimensional sense of difference's complex role in modernity. As such, they educate the reader's ethical and political judgment, but without determining in any given instance what that judgment should be. Lorde in this way engages in a democratic pedagogy, training her reader to see difference's many-sidedness but without giving clear-cut guidelines on how to evaluate it. Lorde shows respect for her reader by throwing her back on her own judgment—for being in full possession of that judgment is essential to maintaining the reflective agency at the heart of democratic citizenship.<sup>118</sup> Treating the reader as an equal, Lorde emboldens her to demand equality from every authority and practice it toward every person.

Lorde's most compact statement of her political theory is "Our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality."<sup>119</sup> To have a future, to have stable expectations for life and freedom and growth, we must practice coequal relationship. Anything less breeds the violence born of domination—a violence that not only harms victims but boomerangs back on perpetrators.<sup>120</sup> It is therefore fair to say that equality is Lorde's north star, her political Polaris—for in addition to setting equal worth on individuals, which she believes is their due, equality ensures futurity. Relationship-within-equality stops the historical cycle—the historical repetition—of the oppressed throwing off oppressors only to find new groups to oppress. Ending the social reproduction of oppression, relationship-within-equality initiates freedom—the general freedom we achieve when we mutually recognize each other's equal claims to freedom—and establishes the field for egalitarian political cocreation, for democratic reconstitution of the public world.<sup>121</sup>

Lorde's politics of difference is her fiercely creative effort to practice equality.

118 For an important interpretation of African American political thinkers' efforts to respect and strengthen the reflective agency of their audiences, see Melvin L. Rogers, "David Walker and the Power of the Appeal," *Political Theory* 43, no. 2 (2015): 208–33.

119 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 122.

120 On the boomerang effect of racial violence in particular, see the anecdote in *Zami* about the "pale girl" running from a white male attacker who refuses help from the narrator because of her "Black face." The narrator concludes that the girl will "die stupid" (5).

121 Or as Beauvoir says in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (a book that Lorde admired), "the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others." Though Beauvoir does not invoke equality explicitly, it is impossible to imagine "individuals achieving freedom through the freedom of others" on any basis other than mutual recognition as equals. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (orig. 1947/1948; New York: Citadel, 1976), 156. For Lorde's admiring references to *Ethics of Ambiguity*, see "Master's Tools," 113, and "Burst of Light," 117. On democratic reconstitution, see Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since "Brown v. Board of Education"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Turner, *Awakening to Race*, chap. 5.



Through her poetic language of difference, Lorde communicates across the inequalities history has left us, establishes coequal relationship with readers, and provides words we can use to build a future together. Lorde's language of difference is a gift to democratic citizens. The still open question is whether we have the strength to accept it.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at annual meetings of the American Political Science Association and the Association for Political Theory, and at political science colloquia of the University of California, Los Angeles; Stanford University; and the University of Oregon. For critical responses to those drafts and helpful conversations about Lorde, I thank Lawrie Balfour, Anuja Bose, Lorna Bracewell, Rachael Briggs, Sean Butorac, Rutger Ceballos, Emily Christensen, Carmen Dege, Christine Di Stefano, Jennifer Einspahr, Laura Grattan, Burke Hendrix, Denise James, Jennet Kirkpatrick, Sina Kramer, Jared Loggins, Joseph Lowndes, Michael Magee, Kirstie McClure, Annie Menzel, A. Y. Odeyi, Grace Reinke, Melvin Rogers, Rachel Sanders, Paige Sechrest, Debra Thompson, Juliet Williams, and Priscilla Yamin. Thank you to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington—especially Dean of Social Sciences George Lovell—for research support. I am especially grateful to Holly A. Smith and Kassandra Ware of the Spelman College Archives for assisting my research in the Audre Lorde Collection.

## 26: Stokely Carmichael and the Longing for Black Liberation Black Power and Beyond

Brandon M. Terry

### Introduction

On March 4, 1968, one month before the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) headquarters dispatched a confidential memorandum to its field offices. This letter announced goals and tactics for the covert, illegal counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) that Director J. Edgar Hoover had launched against African American activists under the goal of preventing “a true black revolution.” Ominously warning of the “rise of a ‘messiah’ who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement,” the memo ordered field offices to “neutralize” and “discredit” potential threats—singling out for special concern then twenty-seven-year-old activist, organizer, and intellectual Stokely Carmichael.<sup>1</sup>

While Carmichael’s star has dimmed considerably since 1968, arguably no African American political figure attracted as much infamy and ire at the height of his influence as the Trinidad-born firebrand. Brash and brilliant, Carmichael came to international notoriety less through his harrowing career as an organizer in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) than as the leading advocate for the Black Power movement. Indeed, while Carmichael was not the first to coin the phrase “Black Power,” he is undoubtedly most responsible for its popular dissemination.<sup>2</sup> Over the objections of Martin Luther King Jr., Carmi-

1 “Memo to SAC, Albany from FBI Director (March 4, 1968),” Federal Bureau of Investigation File No. 100-448006 (Black Nationalist-Hate Groups), 3.

2 Occasionally it is argued that the earliest use of “Black Power” comes from Frederick Douglass, in an 1855 speech titled “The Doom of the Black Power.” Douglass’s meaning, however, was essentially the opposite of its present connotation. For him it was a synonym for “the Slave Power,” that alliance of political and economic interests aligned with the maintenance of slavery, and he used the latter term more regularly. The earliest use I have been able to find is not Douglass but an invidious description of postrevolutionary Haiti in a screed against West Indian emancipation by the British polemicist William Cobbett in his weekly *Political Register*. Most accounts of Black Power’s origin highlight the famed novelist Richard Wright’s use of the term to describe the early phase of African independence in 1954 and its use by congressman Adam Clayton Powell in early 1966 to describe black political demands. Lost in this familiar genealogy is arguably the more directly influential use by Carmichael ally and *Ebony* magazine editor Lerone Bennett Jr., who used the phrase “Black Power” as the title for a series of 1965 essays on black political empowerment during Reconstruction published in *Ebony*. See Frederick Douglass, “The Doom of the Black Power,” in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and John Stauffer (New York: Penguin, 2016), 441–47; “Mentor, On the Slave Trade (January 31, 1807),” in Cobbett’s

chael introduced it as a rallying cry during the March Against Fear in June 1966. Just released from arbitrary arrest, and speaking to a raucous crowd in Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael defiantly declared: "This is the 27th time I have been arrested—I ain't going to jail no more! . . . We want Black Power! . . . That's right. That's what we want, Black Power. We don't have to be ashamed of it . . . We have begged the president. We've begged the federal government—that's all we've been doing . . . It's time we stand up and take over."<sup>3</sup> As Carmichael's biographer Peniel Joseph writes, this speech, and the widely reported spectacle of an enthusiastic crowd repeating "Black Power" in response, "transformed the aesthetics of the black freedom struggle and forever altered the course of the modern civil rights movement."<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, with the exception of Joseph and a handful of scholars, this performance of defiant black militancy has come to stand as synecdoche for Carmichael's political life. This truncated picture largely ignores Carmichael's formative experience as an organizer and organic intellectual within SNCC's movement for radical democracy in the American South, his alliances with anticolonial revolutionaries and statesmen, and his decades-long career, upon changing his name to Kwame Ture, as an international gadfly for enervated traditions of Pan-African socialism. In doing so it obscures Carmichael's *intellectual* contributions, which are distinguished above all by a blistering critique of civil rights liberalism and an influential series of attempts to systematize Black Power into a political philosophy by gathering together ideas from black nationalism, pluralist democratic theory, socialism, and anticolonial thought.

Against these broader currents, I offer here a reading of Carmichael's writings and speeches that reveals his enduring import within the tradition of African American political thought and his subterranean influence on contemporary political thought more broadly. Most significant among Carmichael's intellectual contributions are (1) his participation in, and enlargement of, the theory and praxis of radical democracy as a leading organizer within SNCC, (2) his pathbreaking introduction of the concept of "institutional racism," (3) his controversial attempt to break with the conceptual underpinnings of civil rights liberalism by theorizing African American oppression as an "internal colonialism," and (4) his influential formulation of "identity politics." These arguments are largely articulated in his sprawling but underappreciated posthumously published autobiography, *Ready for Revolution* (2003); in *Stokely Speaks* (1971), the uneven collection of his speeches from the Black Power era; and in the classic *Black Power* (1967), coau-

*Political Register* 11 (January–June 1807): 187; Richard Wright, *Black Power—Three Books from Exile: Black Power, The Color Curtain, and White Man Listen!* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010); on Powell, see Cedric Johnson, *From Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 57–58; For Lerone Bennett Jr., see his "Black Power, Part One," *Ebony*, November 1965, 28–48.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 486.

<sup>4</sup> Peniel Joseph, *Stokely: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2014), 115.

thored with the political scientist Charles V. Hamilton, but which Carmichael describes as “in many ways a collective SNCC project” (RR, 548).<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these important arguments, Carmichael’s trajectory is representative of a central quandary for those invested in the fate and fortunes of leftist internationalism, antiracism, and democratic thinking in both African American political thought and political theory more broadly. No good-faith interrogator of Carmichael’s writings and speeches, particularly those composed after he moved to Guinea at the end of the 1960s, can fail to be struck by his transformation from a charismatic advocate of radically egalitarian, democratic politics into a defender of dogmatic doctrines of revolutionary Pan-Africanism and an apologist for postcolonial authoritarianism. Such a transformation raises the question of what commitments might explain the trajectory of Carmichael’s later thought, or at least provide insight into the ambivalent place of democracy in postcolonial and anti-imperialist politics.

### Early Years: Migration and Marxism

Carmichael was born on June 29, 1941, in Port of Spain, the capital city of Trinidad, to a close-knit working-class family. While Carmichael often invoked his Trinidadian heritage, he also considered it “incomplete” to describe him as “Trinidadian” rather than “pan-Caribbean” (RR, 14). The construction of the Panama Canal, the creation and collapse of European empires, and the war-driven growth of the United States’ economic and military power brought together, in Carmichael’s family alone, relatives from Montserrat, Grenada, Barbados, Antigua, Nevis, Tobago, and Panama (RR, 16). Carmichael was raised by family in Trinidad while his mother, a US citizen in virtue of being born in the Panama Canal Zone, and his father, an undocumented migrant seaman and carpenter, left for New York in the mid-1940s.

This syncretic sense of a pan-Caribbean identity led Carmichael, very early on, to conceive of his heritage as one of “displacement and dispersal,” marked by shared forms of racial and colonial oppression as well as cultural continuities or “survivals” which served as connective tissue across imperial boundaries (RR, 17). Later in life Carmichael would insist that these continuities could be explained by Afro-Caribbean blacks’ being essentially “African,” carrying with them, often under a layer of accommodation to European rule, a “dynamic inheritance from Africa” revealed in a shared spiritual orientation, expressive culture, and aesthetic and ethical values (RR, 17).

<sup>5</sup> Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Turé) and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, Vintage ed. (New York: Vintage, 1992), hereafter cited in text as BP; Stokely Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks: From Black Power to Pan-Africanism* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2007), hereafter cited in text as SS; Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Turé)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), hereafter cited in text as RR.

As a youth, however, Carmichael, like many Afro-Caribbean subjects, wrestled with how to “create linkages within the race” across ostensibly national or other differences and how to interpret and respond to “the forces that create many of the differences that make up a heterogeneous blackness.”<sup>6</sup> These questions took on a special urgency for Carmichael as he reunited with his parents in 1950s New York. There he navigated a dynamic racial, cultural, and intellectual milieu shaped by what Carmichael describes as “two volatile streams of recent arrivals”—migrants from the Caribbean and refugees from the Jim Crow South (RR, 51).

In Carmichael’s retrospective narration of his experience as a young migrant seeking cultural and political orientation in the US, we can locate one source of his mature faith in the ability of expressive culture and black “counterpublic” spaces to forge racial and ideological solidarity.<sup>7</sup> While Carmichael’s autobiography is prone to flights of romanticism, imagining the black New York of the 1950s as a relatively unified “community” forged from “tolerance, respect, and the reality of concrete circumstances common to all,” the political significance he attributes to spaces like his uncle’s record shop, the local barbershop, and speakers’ corners in Harlem is considerable. The “old Garveyites, race men, street players, black Republicans and Black Muslims, nationalists of all descriptions, and the rappers, poets, and wordsmen” that inhabited these spaces became, collectively, “a necessary corrective, an early window into an African-American worldview and sensibility, a crucially important counterpoint of reference” against the cultural norms and narratives that he received from mainstream institutions (RR, 74).<sup>8</sup>

That Carmichael emphasizes the ostensibly *critical* or “corrective” role of black counterpublic spaces should not be entirely surprising. Driven by what he would later describe as “conventional immigrant optimism,” Carmichael’s mother committed her children to a striving integrationism. The Carmichael family relocated to a largely Italian Bronx neighborhood, joined a predominantly white church, and eventually enrolled Stokely in the prestigious (and almost entirely white) Bronx Science High School (RR, 78).

Even in predominantly white spaces, however, Carmichael sought out pockets of dissent. At Bronx Science he joined a small left-wing student faction named Kokista, alongside children of Communist Party radicals.<sup>9</sup> This brief, intellec-

6 Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1962* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2005) 6.

7 On the idea of a black counterpublic, see Michael C. Dawson, “A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics,” *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 195–223.

8 On the significance of barbershops and popular cultural outlets as institutional bases for black counterpublic discourse, see Melissa Harris-Lacwell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

9 Carmichael’s friend Gene Dennis was the son of Eugene Dennis Sr., former chairman of the Communist Party USA who was convicted of sedition under the Smith Act. See *Dennis v. U.S.*, 341 U.S. 494 (1951).

tually formative introduction to Marxist thought led Carmichael to insist throughout his career on fundamental axioms: the “constant political duty” of “regular theoretical study,” the importance of historical social theory, the possible need for “revolutionary solutions” to social injustice, and the significance of class conflict, even within black political life (RR, 92). Despite these commitments, however, Carmichael never ultimately became a communist, given his discomfort with strident atheism and skepticism of Marxists’ faith in interracial labor solidarity (RR, 93, 104).

Further, Carmichael was an early and avid reader of the iconoclastic Pan-African leftists C. L. R. James and George Padmore. He shared their enthusiasm for the “vanguardist” potential of anticolonial and anti-racist movements, as well as their critique of those who would subsume the political aspirations of such movements or black cultural particularity under the ostensible “universalisms” offered by European philosophical traditions (RR, 93–94).<sup>10</sup> James, for example, criticized dogmatic socialists and romantic liberals as early as 1948 for not recognizing the African American civil rights struggle as having a “vitality and a validity of its own,” admonishing against “any attempt to subordinate or to push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent Negro struggle for democratic rights.”<sup>11</sup>

### SNCC, Civil Rights, and Radical Democracy

Fatefully, Carmichael’s senior year of high school coincided with the dramatic intensification of this “independent Negro struggle” with the sit-in protests launched by black students across the South.<sup>12</sup> By April 1960, more than 120 of these student activists convened in Raleigh, North Carolina, creating the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to sustain and organize the

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, C. L. R. James, “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States (1948)” in C. L. R. James on the “*Negro Question*,” ed. Scott McLemee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), and George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972). James, it must be noted, was one of Carmichael’s most exuberant supporters among public intellectuals, describing him as having “enormous revolutionary potential” while insisting that “no clearer or stronger voice for socialism has ever been raised in the US.” See C. L. R. James, “Black Power (1967),” accessed December 30, 2017, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1967/black-power.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> C. L. R. James, “Revolutionary Answer,” 139.

<sup>12</sup> On February 1, 1960, a group of four black college students at North Carolina A&T made their purchases at the downtown Woolworth’s store in Greensboro, North Carolina, and sat down at the segregated lunch counter, refusing to leave. This act of disobedience, and the disruption of the Jim Crow racial order it portended, occasioned a wave of imitative protests across the South, involving tens of thousands of black students within months. While these protests captured the national imagination, there had been episodic use of the sit-in tactic in desegregation protests in Chicago, Baltimore, and elsewhere dating back to at least the 1940s. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 11.

new wave of black student militancy.<sup>13</sup> Carmichael fell into SNCC's orbit during a demonstration against the House Un-American Activities Committee in Washington, DC, where, as a senior in high school, he met a contingent from the allied Nonviolent Action Group (NAG) at historically black Howard University. Impressed by their courage and conscience, Carmichael followed them to Howard, showing more interest in the struggle against Jim Crow than in the premedical studies his parents anticipated.<sup>14</sup>

The major intellectual and administrative force behind the creation of SNCC was the legendary organizer Ella J. Baker.<sup>15</sup> Baker worked for roughly two decades as an activist and administrator in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) before becoming, in 1957, the first executive secretary of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Disillusioned by her experiences with civil rights leaders like Walter White and Martin Luther King, Baker developed a critique of the elitism, male chauvinism, excessive bureaucracy, and autocratic or charismatic leadership in movement organizations that powerfully influenced Carmichael and other SNCC activists.<sup>16</sup> Lamenting a career bearing those "frustrations and disillusionment that come when the prophetic

13 Carson, "In Struggle," 18; also see *BP*, 87–88.

14 Carmichael ultimately majored in philosophy, making him one of the few intellectuals included in this volume who actually received university training in philosophy. While at Howard, Carmichael studied with or was mentored by some of the most brilliant intellectuals in African America, including the legendary sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, the pioneering historian Rayford Logan, the great literary critic and poet Sterling Brown, and the newly appointed teacher of his first-year English class, Toni Morrison. Morrison, before going on to becoming one of the most celebrated novelists in American history, worked as an editor at Random House, where among other books, she solicited *Stokely Speaks*.

15 "Ms. Baker," Carmichael writes, "was far and away our most influential adviser, a constant presence, counselor, and role model; she was in many ways the organization's principal architect" (*RR*, 305).

16 Despite leaving behind a meager collection of speeches, writings, and interviews, Baker's political thought—detailed primarily in reminiscences and writings by former SNCC members—has become among the most influential political philosophic visions among activists in the Movement for Black Lives. Contemporary activists embrace her call for movement organizations with decentralized leadership and vast autonomy for local initiative, while also explicitly developing the incipient feminist and queer theoretic resources in her critique of black political orthodoxy. In particular, many activists and intellectuals see their calls to "center" or "privilege" historically marginalized voices in political deliberation, and critique of norms of respectability or status, as derived from Baker's democratic criticism of civil rights movement praxis. For the leading scholarly texts of the Baker revival, see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), and Erica Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). For a representative text from the Movement for Black Lives, see Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement (October 7, 2014)," accessed January 3, 2018, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>. For sympathetic critiques of where the Baker revival introduces contradictions that undermine its own democratic aspirations to participatory parity, a critique of arbitrary power, authentic deliberation, and political accountability see Brandon M. Terry, "After Ferguson," *Point*, no. 10 (Summer 2015), and Brandon M. Terry and Jason Lee, "Rethinking the Problem of Alliance: Organized Labor and Black Political Life," *New Labor Forum* 26, no. 3 (September 2017): 16–26.

leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay,” Baker’s chief hope, echoed by many students, was to encourage an organic stridency and spontaneity in youth protest by preventing it from being “captured” by existing civil rights institutions or “leader centered” politics.<sup>17</sup>

Despite Baker’s criticisms of King and SCLC, the early SNCC shared their emphasis on mass nonviolent direct action, as opposed to the litigation, lobbying, and statesmanship conducted by the NAACP and Urban League. “With the judicial strategy [of the NAACP],” Carmichael lamented, “our struggle had been entirely in the hands of our heroic but invisible lawyers . . . a struggle by proxy.” Refusing to reduce protest to considerations of efficacy or expertise, SCLC and SNCC activists linked direct action to the realization of black dignity and self-respect (not to mention white conscience).<sup>18</sup> What Carmichael and others in SNCC celebrated about nonviolent direct action was that “everyone brave enough could share in the struggle for his or her own liberation and be seen to do so (RR, 176).”

Although too rarely noted, the sit-ins’ militant demand for desegregation in public accommodations challenged prevailing conceptions of citizenship to expand the scope of claims on interpersonal conduct and incorporate state protections within the quickly expanding domain of mass commercial and consumer life. This redefinition of citizenship deflated, in large part, the expansive authority and dominion over these spaces once promiscuously ceded to business owners qua owners and whites qua whites under Jim Crow capitalism. Further, as nearly all on the left flank of the civil rights movement recognized, these protests also inevitably raised more fundamental questions about the vulnerability of equal citizenship to both economic inequality and sedimented and habits of racialized domination, acquiescence, and humiliation.<sup>19</sup> Against those who saw the aim of the sit-ins as simply pursuing inclusion in mainstream American life, Carmichael began to argue that “for a real end to exclusion in American society, that society would have to be so radically changed that the goal *cannot really be defined as inclusion*” (SS, 12, emphasis added).<sup>20</sup>

17 Ella J. Baker, “Bigger Than a Hamburger,” *Patriot*, (May 1960).

18 Carmichael also raised objections about the efficacy of litigation and lobbying without direct action. “In [Roy Wilkins of the NAACP’s] mind, whatever the movement had accomplished—the legislation—was entirely because of the insider contacts and skillful influence of the NAACP. It never occurred to him that they had never been able to get any legislation—not as much as an antilynching law—until masses of black people had taken to the streets in nonviolent direct action” (RR, 499). Carmichael also acknowledges the significance of the Brown decision, while arguing that the massive resistance it provoked and its narrow scope “exposed the severe limitations of a purely legalistic approach” (RR, 176). For a more sympathetic account of the NAACP’s campaign for an antilynching bill, see Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

19 On racialized habits of domination and acquiescence see Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since “Brown v. Board of Education”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

20 It is important to note that despite the early SNCC’s principled interracialism and rhetoric of “beloved community,” the effort to uproot legal segregation did not obviously entail extensive racial integration as a constitutively related social end or good. Responding to a racist assailant



Grasping toward these more radical goals, Carmichael began, by 1961, to express concern about the limits of nonviolent direct action in realizing them. The “success” of efforts like the Freedom Rides, Carmichael warned, depended far too heavily on factors outside of activists’ control: the spectacular brutality dispensed by white counterdemonstrators, the indulgence of mob violence by local authorities, and even the bizarre geopolitics of the Cold War.<sup>21</sup> Implicit in this criticism is not only an assumption that black political insurgency should or could aspire toward sovereign agency over political outcomes, but also a critique of the expectation, among King and others, that undeserved, voluntary suffering by righteous, nonviolent, and dignified protesters would reliably produce the morally redemptive response of shame from witnesses and opponents.<sup>22</sup> For Carmichael, the implacable resistance to black and anticolonial liberation raised a trenchant challenge to this philosophical anthropology, and he wondered aloud whether whites had become so damaged by racist ideology and bad faith that they were no longer “capable of the shame that might become a revolutionary emotion,” as much nonviolent action surmised (*BP*, xvii).<sup>23</sup>

In seeking a “new political direction” beyond direct action demonstrations and the politics of shame, Carmichael became a vocal advocate of what Charles Payne

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and heckler during the sit-ins on Maryland’s Route 40, Carmichael recalls himself saying, “Lady, believe me, we aren’t here ‘cause we think the food is good, or because your company is attractive, okay? We here for one simple reason and one reason only. You, collectively, do not have the right, none of you, to tell us where we can go or cannot go. . . . That’s all. It’s a matter of principle. Once we establish that principle, I guarantee you’ll never see my face in this place again. You better believe it ain’t about white folks’ company” (*RR*, 530).

21 This latter concern made the politics of Jim Crow a central issue for US foreign policy elites, tasked with winning the favor of the newly independent nations of the so-called Third World and disarming the force of Soviet Union propaganda highlighting America’s congenital problem with white supremacy. See, for example, Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Derrick Bell Jr., *Silent Covenants: “Brown v. Board of Education” and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (New York: Oxford University, 2004), chap. 6.

22 In his autobiography Carmichael describes the theory of nonviolent direct action as “taking control of a situation and an opponent, actually imposing your will even as he rains blows down on your unremitting head. . . . This controlling of the situation entails a nonviolence of word, deed, and demeanor. . . . You merely had to eliminate everything in your behavior—word, deed, look, gesture, or body language—that might provoke or nourish the impulse to violence, the evolutionary conditioning to battle, in your opponent” (*RR* 169, emphasis added). This emphasis on “control” can not only obscure the inherently non-sovereign character of political agency and its dynamic outcomes, but may also reflect a more fundamental and continuous commitment on Carmichael’s part, to sovereignty as the ideal telos of group politics as such. For a critique of such arguments see Sharon Krause, “Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics,” *Political Theory* 39, no. 3 (June 2011): 299–324.

23 It should be noted that Carmichael, at least in *Black Power*, does not suggest that only whites are susceptible to such pathologies or deformation. This is implicit in his refusal to claim, a priori, that blacks would not be racist against whites if “Black Power” was achieved, although he clearly considers such an outcome a less objectionable moral wrong.

has described as the “community organizing tradition” within SNCC (RR, 223).<sup>24</sup> Objecting to what he polemically described as “the SCLC approach of massive, temporary mobilization and press agency,” Carmichael more fervently called for “creating powerfully organized communities capable of sustaining political struggle” (RR, 445). In doing so he became a closer admirer of Baker’s democratic thought, which championed a “developmental style of politics” where committed activists and volunteers would help cultivate among historically disempowered citizens a sense that they have the *right* to define the needs and problems that structure politics, the *capacity* to shape their own destiny, and the *authority* to hold representatives and institutions accountable.<sup>25</sup> To achieve such aims, the right to vote was considered paramount, and the community-organizing wing of SNCC focused on building a militant civic movement to uproot the byzantine and brutal obstacles to black voting in the South.

SNCC activists envisioned subjecting vast dimensions of civil society to a demand for the participatory parity of ordinary, everyday people, operating without subjection to vanguards, elites, or experts.<sup>26</sup> This form of grassroots democracy, on Baker’s account, would perform the work of recognition-respect, showing genuine acknowledgment and enthusiasm for the moral agency, equal standing, and civic potential of all citizens.<sup>27</sup> It would also further the work of *empowerment*, allowing ordinary people to undermine relations of domination, resist evolving forms of oppression, and contest the unjust usurpation of their prerogatives over important domains of human life, including politics itself.<sup>28</sup>

This democratic ideal, Baker provocatively argued, was incompatible with forms of charismatic, messianic, or autocratic political leadership even *within* civil rights organizations ostensibly organized to deepen democracy. These features of movement politics, she claimed, disavowed valuable local knowledge and culture, arbitrarily marginalized important voices (especially women and working-class or poor blacks), distorted deliberation, and corroded citizens’ capacities for taking initiative and articulating their needs.<sup>29</sup> “Instead of the leader as a person who was supposed to be a magic man,” Baker argued, “you could develop individuals who were bound together by a concept that benefited the larger number of individuals and provided an opportunity for them to grow into being respon-

24 Charles S. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

25 Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 68. Also see Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

26 On “participatory parity,” see Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), chap. 4.

27 On the idea of recognition-respect, see Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), esp. 122–33.

28 Patchen Markell, “The Insufficiency of Non-domination,” *Political Theory* 36, no. 1 (February 2008): 9–36.

29 Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 191; Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting*, 7.

sible for carrying out a program.”<sup>30</sup> Tightly tied to practice, this developmental community-organizing vision relied heavily on open-ended deliberations among SNCC members, informal education initiatives (workshops, “Freedom Schools,” etc.), and the development of alternative political practices and rituals like independent elections and parties (e.g., the Freedom Ballot).

Much of the late twentieth-century enthusiasm for “participatory democracy” in political theory and left politics can be traced back to these efforts.<sup>31</sup> A number of SNCC activists went on to be prominent within the “New Left” and its principal organization, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Tom Hayden, for example, after joining the Freedom Rides and reporting on SNCC projects in McComb, Mississippi, and Albany, Georgia, drew in large part on his interpretations of SNCC culture to produce the initial draft of SDS’s Port Huron Statement, arguably the most influential statement of “participatory democracy” as an ideal.<sup>32</sup> Distilling, in part, their sense of how SNCC’s organizing style cultivated a passion for democracy and enhanced the capabilities for negotiation, argument, and analysis among the most dispossessed, Hayden and SDS argued for an entire society where problems are generalized, clarified, and deliberated on, political decisions are made by “public groupings,” and such participation builds communal solidarity and public freedom, alongside individual fulfillment and independence.<sup>33</sup>

In his autobiography, however, Carmichael mocked the analysis of such “left intellectuals,” claiming that many in SNCC “always laughed at these theoretical formulations” (RR, 319). While Carmichael does appear at times to grant that a commitment to open-ended deliberation is constitutive of respecting individual freedom, the equal standing and voice of all participants, and protection for the “minority” in any decision, he focuses more on its *instrumental* benefits (RR, 300–301). Describing the emergence of SNCC’s organizing culture, Carmichael argues that the need for a process that emphasized mutual understanding, orientation toward consensus, shared analysis, and deep trust emerged *organically* given the violence and danger of Mississippi Delta organizing. “The notion of an authority figure, leader, or group of leaders issuing orders is laughable,” Carmichael argued. “Nobody is gonna risk his or her life for a program or policy with which he or she seriously disagrees. . . . All you could do is talk it out” (RR, 319). For Carmichael, the constitutive goods of deliberation, whatever they might be,

30 Ella J. Baker, quoted in Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 188.

31 The so-called third generation of critical theory emerged out of the New Left and has been deeply engaged with social movements around racial justice and radical democracy more broadly. See, for example, Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

32 Tom Hayden, ed., *Inspiring Participatory Democracy: Student Movements from Port Huron to Today* (New York: Routledge, 2015). See also Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting*, 127–28.

33 “The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society,” in *Inspiring Participatory Democracy*, 127–84.

appear subordinate to other instrumental goods, like courage, group identity and solidarity, a shared analytical frame, and the ability to exercise collective power over political processes (RR, 300–302).<sup>34</sup> Once Carmichael thought he had discovered other means for realizing such ends, it is not surprising that his interest in “deliberation” and Bakeresque formulations fell by the wayside.

### **Freedom Summer, Bloody Lowndes, and the Birth of Black Power**

The crucial event for understanding Carmichael’s mature thinking about politics is 1964’s “Freedom Summer.” Under the direction of SNCC’s predominantly black field organizers, SNCC recruited hundreds of largely white volunteers, many from the nation’s elite colleges, to help create “freedom schools,” register voters, and, most famously, found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), an alternative to the lily-white official state delegation to the national Democratic Party convention. The Freedom Schools, which Carmichael describes as “an uncensored, student-centered, creative classroom situation,” revolved around everything from African American and African history to local politics to workshops on sewing and poetry. Not only did SNCC activists want Mississippi blacks to learn “all the things about their world, their country, and their history that the state’s Bantu educational system deliberately kept from them,” but the schools were tightly tied to organizing. As Carmichael saw it, “you can have no serious organizing without serious education. And always, the people will teach you as much as you teach them” (RR, 391). Ideally, then, the Freedom Schools worked as spaces of mutually enhancing, egalitarian exchange.<sup>35</sup> Local residents would teach as well as learn, in the process coming to appreciate the skills and insights of those around them as much as those of the visiting activists.<sup>36</sup>

While the Freedom Schools were “probably the most unambiguous successes,”

34 Carmichael also criticizes open-ended deliberative democracy in political organizations for the logistical difficulties it imposes in terms of time, cognitive bandwidth, and the opportunity structure for action. Cornel West echoes this criticism of Baker, arguing that she did not appropriately reckon with the “tremendous clash between democratic time and market time.” Cornel West with Christa Buschendorf, *Black Prophetic Fire* (Boston: Beacon, 2014), 99–100. Carmichael and his allies in SNCC would later mock fellow members’ arguments in favor of deliberative democratic organizing as naive, indulgent, and individualistic. See RR, 430, and Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting*.

35 A transcript of Carmichael’s teaching, which focused on the critique of racial and cultural bias in the standardization of language, is included in *Stokely Speaks*, 3–8. Carmichael was an avid defender of the value of African American Vernacular English, and much of his autobiography is written in this variety of English.

36 In some respects, especially the axiomatic affirmation of equal intelligence, the vigilance against hierarchy in pedagogy, the insistence that the untrained or noncredentialed could teach, and in the demand that teaching strengthen the students’ will to learn independently, SNCC’s Freedom Schools have significant overlap with the vision advanced in Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

according to Carmichael, it was the MFDP that he thought was “the best—most fully realized—example of SNCC’s organizing vision” (*RR*, 387, 437). Blocked by unyielding repression, terrorism, and obstruction, would-be black voters were often prevented from official registration, much less the exercise of their ballot. What MFDP allowed was the chance for blacks to instead perform an *unofficial* “registration,” selecting alternative delegates to the national Democratic convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. In the process they would gather to debate key issues and select representatives to publicly articulate and dramatize the injustice of black political subordination. This organizing project managed, ingeniously, to combine the community-organizing mission of creating local institutions and discovering grassroots leadership with a more performative politics of moral theater. Proving the flimsy lie of black political apathy by recruiting tens of thousands of blacks to vote in an *unofficial* election, the MFDP sought to shame the corrupt bargains of the Democrats on civil rights while enacting, in anticipatory fashion, a post-Jim Crow Mississippi politics built on racial reconciliation and a disavowal of white supremacy (*SS*, 14–15). Carmichael called this form of politics “parallelism.” It is a prefigurative, performative mode of democratic dissent, where alternative institutions are erected to disclose both the illegitimacy of the present and the possibility of a reconciliatory future (*BP*, 88).

“Parallelism” overlaps in significant ways with the tradition of black nationalism. In Eldridge Cleaver’s incisive formulation, black nationalism involves a “projection of alternative sovereignty,” where, brandishing claims of illegitimacy against the broader society, black subjects lay claim to, or practically usurp, key functions of official state or mainstream institutions (diplomacy, public education, self-defense, etc.) and enact parallel, dissenting versions of them.<sup>37</sup> Yet while the democratic dissent of the early SNCC ultimately aims for *reconciliation* built upon the imagined future prefigured by these alternatives, the black nationalist seeks *enduring* forms of institutional autonomy and a political destiny distinct (to some degree) from “white America.”<sup>38</sup> This overlapping commitment to “parallelism” helps explain the particular path through which Carmichael turned toward black nationalist ideas as his disillusionment with the prospects for racial justice intensified.

At the Atlantic City convention, despite the passionate testimony of MFDP delegates like Fannie Lou Hamer detailing systemic rights abuses and voter repression, Democratic leaders refused to unseat the lily-white Mississippi delegation. Hoping to hold on to a New Deal coalition built from such compromises with southern white supremacists, liberal Democrats offered a symbolic concession—

37 Eldridge Cleaver, “The Land Question and Black Liberation,” in *Post-prison Writings and Speeches*, ed. Robert Scheer (London: Panther Books, 1969), 89.

38 For a critique of black nationalist arguments that racial solidarity requires institutional autonomy, see Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), chaps. 3–4.

two at-large delegate seats—that fell far short of SNCC’s heightened expectations while doing nothing to staunch the bleeding of white racists from the party.<sup>39</sup> Overtures from liberal Democratic politicians and civil rights leaders like Bayard Rustin to accept the compromise (as well as threats from labor union officials to fall in line or lose funding) only intensified the sense of betrayal among SNCC activists. Instead of sending “a signal of encouragement, especially to a generation of idealistic young Americans of all races, the assurance that they had a political home within the system, a major party worthy of their respect,” Carmichael writes, “the [party] leadership had turned back to try to embrace a messed-up past” (RR, 411).<sup>40</sup>

Carmichael drew bleak conclusions from these events. Blasting the “legalistic” justifications conjured for the MFDP’s defeat, Carmichael began to dismiss law as simply “the agent of those in political power . . . the product of those powerful enough to define right and wrong and to have that definition legitimized by ‘law’” (BP, 95). Worse yet, the expectation that truly disadvantaged blacks would win such power by moving the nation’s conscience, or as part of a powerful coalition of liberals, labor, and civil rights organizations, was a fantasy. The “lesson” of Atlantic City, he argued, “was not merely that the national conscience was generally unreliable but that, very specifically, black people . . . could not rely on their so-called allies,” who were more likely to “accept the legitimacy of the basic values and institutions of the society” rather than countenance a “major reorientation” (BP, 60, 96).

The only group to have a fundamental and enduring interest in resisting anti-black racial domination, Carmichael contended, would be blacks themselves. Carmichael argued that the patterns of American political development suggested that blacks could have “no assurance—save a kind of idiot optimism”—that any civil rights gain could not be abandoned or curtailed “as soon as a shift in political sentiments occurs” among whites, or perhaps even simply white elites (BP, 79).<sup>41</sup>

39 Johnson’s overtures could not even stop the majority of the Mississippi delegation from withdrawing at the 1964 convention. All but three members left rather than promise to support the full Democratic slate of candidates. The state would go for Barry Goldwater that fall, and for a Republican in every election from 1964 to 2016, excepting the right-wing populist George Wallace in 1968 and Jimmy Carter’s slight upset victory in 1976. No Democratic candidate since Adlai Stevenson in 1956 has received more than 44 percent of the votes in a Mississippi presidential election. On the tragic compromises made with segregationists during the New Deal, see Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

40 Shortly thereafter, the MFDP would challenge the legitimacy of Mississippi’s congressional delegation, appealing to the Reconstruction-era precedent of southern states denied congressional representation for violating black voting rights in defiance of the Fifteenth Amendment. Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, “Freedom Primer No. 3: The Right to Vote and the Congressional Challenge” (1965), accessed June 4, 2018, [http://www.crmvet.org/docs/ms\\_primer3\\_64.pdf](http://www.crmvet.org/docs/ms_primer3_64.pdf).

41 This idea that black rights, functionally if not morally, depend on mere sufferance is a long-standing black nationalist contention that finds its most famous recent exposition in Derrick Bell, *Faces in the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

Such indictments echoed those contemporaneously leveled by Malcolm X, who excoriated the Democratic Party as a “political con game” for its concessions to white supremacist Dixiecrats.<sup>42</sup>

While post-Atlantic City remnants of the MFDP continued to seek integration with the Democrats, Carmichael argued that such coalitions were “premature” and exploitative so long as blacks lacked the power to hold their ostensible partners accountable or punish betrayals like Atlantic City (RR, 322).<sup>43</sup> Blacks, Carmichael argued, “would have to organize and obtain their own power base before they could begin to think of coalition with others,” operating especially through “separate parties truly responsive to [black] communities” in areas where African Americans constituted a significant majority (BP, 96). He sought to test this theory in Lowndes County, Alabama, founding the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) as the momentum around voting rights agitation intensified with the arrival of Dr. King and the SCLC in nearby Selma (RR, 438).

While independent black political parties have been advocated at various points in American history, including the short-lived Freedom Now Party started by nationalists and socialists in the early 1960s, Carmichael’s commentary on the LCFO remains an important set of reflections on political parties, partisanship, and democracy.<sup>44</sup> In Lowndes, over 80 percent of the population was black, but before the Selma March none were registered to vote, and the black community was subjected to an extraordinary level of economic dispossession.<sup>45</sup> Given this potential majority, Carmichael envisioned an enduring institutional space for open political deliberation and organization, where rural black Alabamians and what allies they could find would convene to share information and interpretations, produce priorities and agendas, select candidates, and try to win electoral and legislative majorities. This is, as Nancy Rosenblum has compellingly written, the “vital” work of democracy that parties perform.<sup>46</sup>

Carmichael’s particular defense of the LCFO project was built upon a critique

42 Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove, 1965), 23–44.

43 Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics,” in *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, 2nd ed., ed. Devon W. Carbado and Don Weise (New York: Cleis, 2015), 116–29.

44 On the Freedom Now Party, see Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt, 2007), chap. 4.

45 Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

46 Nancy Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 367. As Nancy Rosenblum has persuasively argued, political parties are the “orphans” of political philosophy, without much attention devoted to them beyond antiparty broadsides. While Rosenblum is critical of parties that organize on the grounds of particular identities like race and that cannot seek to forge political majorities, the LCFO, properly understood, does not fit this condemnation. Not only was the party ostensibly open to white allies, but Carmichael also spoke of independent organization as a precondition of broader alliances in the future. This would feature less prominently in his thought in later years, and in his more revolutionary, militantly partisan efforts like the All-African Revolutionary People’s Party.

of law and an expansive conception of party politics. Such an organization would advance the “developmental” politics long associated with SNCC, helping to instruct the formerly disenfranchised and presently oppressed in the machinery of government and exercise their civic capacities. The aim, at least in Carmichael’s view, was not simply seizing the existing spoils system for blacks. He instead envisioned a prefigurative federalism, where parties like the LCFO, at the local level, “could establish in that one area a viable government based on a new and different set of values—on humaneness—and serve as an example of what civilized government *could* be in this society” (*BP*, 145).

The question of values, along with the capacity to enforce them, was crucial for Carmichael. He saw the enactment of law and its enforcement as fundamentally distinct, the latter relying on principled public officials that share interests with their constituencies, as well as vigilant organizations with the capability to hold them accountable. Black Power meant therefore that at least locally, “if a Negro is elected sheriff, he can end police brutality. If a black man is elected tax assessor, he can collect and channel funds for the building of better roads and schools serving black people” (*BP*, 21). Alongside these functions of distributing government services and protecting blacks from racial domination, the party would also serve as the primary vehicle for sustaining the solidarity and patronage (jobs, welfare, etc.) necessary to resist the fear and forms of economic repression (evictions, firings, loan recalls, etc.) that attempts to challenge social oppression inevitably provoke (*BP*, 119–20).

Such resistance would not only involve voting political enemies—“a few African-killing sheriffs,” as Carmichael put it—out of office (*RR*, 461). It could even include the open embrace of armed collective self-defense against those who would use or condone paramilitary violence to violate blacks’ rights if the state was unwilling or unable to protect them (*BP*, 52–53; *RR*, 461, 474). This mingling of self-defense and formal politics has deeply republican roots and is descendant in many ways from the paramilitary tradition represented by the Union Leagues that fought white supremacists and organized black voters during Reconstruction.<sup>47</sup> This open embrace of armed self-defense also influenced the party’s symbol, the black panther (which Carmichael frequently claimed was an animal that would attack only when attacked first), and became a major inspiration for the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which Carmichael would briefly join (*RR*, 476).

While this emphasis on local control and self-reliance would later make some Black Power advocates strange bedfellows with the “devolution revolution” of late twentieth-century conservatism’s “New Federalism,” this should not fully obscure the democratic radicalism Carmichael defends.<sup>48</sup> While critics of democracy argue that mass participation leads to the corruption of character and

47 Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), chap. 6.

48 For this critique of Black Power intellectuals, see Adolph Reed Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-segregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).



that the “knowledgeable” few rather than the incompetent masses should rule, Carmichael remained blisteringly critical of the ways that racist ideologies infect discourses of “qualifications” or “expertise” (SS, 9–16). Defending ordinary people’s “capacity to grow and lead and articulate,” Carmichael also mocked the reduction of the supposed epistemic bases for political authority to technical and managerial skills rather than ethics, arguing, “If preparation means learning to rule in the racist manner that whites demonstrated in Lowndes County . . . then black people should not bother to learn these lessons” (BP, 107).

The history of political philosophy is largely skeptical of democracy, and even ostensible democrats suggest all manner of qualifications—race, gender, property, intelligence, education, etc.—on the right to exercise political authority.<sup>49</sup> Carmichael, by contrast, argued that a poor, rural, formally uneducated, broadly disenfranchised, racially stigmatized, and economically vulnerable population not only should have the right to vote but *must organize into political parties based on this shared subjection to protect themselves and point a new way forward for the larger society*. Such an achievement, Carmichael contended, would constitute “Black Power,” and his early articulations of what precisely the controversial phrase might mean helped win him the chairmanship of SNCC and with it, national prominence.

### Black Power Politics

The ideas that Carmichael articulated under the sign of Black Power and in the classic text of that name bear the imprint of the post-Freedom Summer SNCC, the midcentury black nationalist revival sparked by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, and the “indigenous” forms of black nationalism that SNCC organizers encountered in the South (RR, 307). The defeat of the MFDP pushed Carmichael toward a defense of “independent” black politics and away from Rustin and King’s talk of left-liberal coalition. The aftermath of Freedom Summer and the MFDP defeat also presented an existential crisis *within* SNCC, however. On Carmichael’s account, the summer’s massive influx of volunteers, a significant number of whom wanted to stay on as more permanent staff, placed devastating strains on the “full participatory democracy” once central to SNCC’s identity and solidarity, warranting its abandonment (RR, 430).

In the early days of SNCC, Carmichael lamented, “people tended to know each other, have similar experiences and a common vocabulary.” The “relatively small”

49 For a contemporary critique of democracy on epistocratic grounds that concedes that the optimal political arrangement, at least provisionally, will disproportionately exclude blacks and the poor in the United States, see Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). Interestingly, however, Brennan does acknowledge that it may be important for particular groups to be empowered (perhaps through representatives) in some fashion to prevent group-based domination or to best represent their particular interests.

staff allowed everyone to feel “involved at a frontline level” and facilitated meetings that would end in “consensus . . . [and] a feeling of closeness, agreement, and direction” (RR, 429). While nostalgic for this iteration of SNCC and sympathetic to the worry that “bureaucracy [would] crush life and creativity” out of the organization, Carmichael ultimately judged that “SNCC’s usual process of decision-making became unworkable” given market constraints on time and attention, modern social complexity, and the ideological and interest-based differences, even *within* a group like SNCC (RR, 429).<sup>50</sup>

More controversially, Carmichael and other black organizers within SNCC began to raise worries about SNCC’s principled commitment to interracial organizing and association.<sup>51</sup> Carmichael openly wondered whether whites could ever successfully “free themselves not so much from overt racist attitudes in themselves as from a more subtle paternalism bred into them by the society” (BP, 28–29). Given the depth of white supremacist habituation, Carmichael charged, even the organizational *presence* of ostensible white liberal allies could lead blacks to fall back into enduring habits of white authority and black acquiescence entrenched under slavery and the Jim Crow order, undermining the kind of self-respect and mature civic capacities necessary for black liberation (SS, 27; RR, 354).

Genuine white allies, Carmichael argued, would acknowledge this difficulty and, without resenting their exclusion, aid black-led and black-staffed institutions (e.g., money, technical support). They would also primarily devote themselves to organizing within poor and working-class *white* communities to uproot the racism that remains an obstacle to a coalition between poor blacks and whites (BP, 82–83; RR, 532). This *intra*racial organizing, Carmichael surmised, would also have the pragmatic benefits of avoiding the hysteria around interracial sex in mixed organizations that haunted media coverage of Freedom Summer and proved internally disruptive within a youth organization. It would also weed out, Carmichael thought, the unreliable white “adventurers” seeking countercultural experiences among blacks, and, above all, the violence meted out against white activists seen as “race-traitors” by white supremacists (RR, 388, 427, 466–70, 566).<sup>52</sup>

Despite these southern and student organization underpinnings, however, Black Power political thought would ultimately become most prominently and

50 It is appropriate to see Carmichael as one of the bridge figures in the transition from the participatory democracy theories of the 1960s and 1970s toward later deliberative theories, particularly those which foreground identity-based “enclaves,” to use Jane Mansbridge’s formulation in “Using Power / Fighting Power,” *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (1994): 53–73.

51 Criticism of participatory democracy within SNCC after Freedom Summer began to rhetorically figure it as a quintessentially “white” practice, a luxury and excess that the militant struggle for black liberation could not afford. Or, as Carmichael puts it, veteran organizers worried that SNCC was turning into a “debating society with so many new, strange-sounding white folk” (RR, 430).

52 The assassination of his close friend Jonathan Daniels, a white activist in Alabama, was particularly devastating for Carmichael, steeling his views against white organizing in black neighborhoods. See Joseph, *Stokely*, 90–92.

theoretically tied to the postindustrial ghetto where black migration and white flight portended black majorities in many American inner cities. Part of this tethering emerged in response to the urban riots that occurred regularly in American cities from 1964 through 1968. Nearly every major African American political figure of note treated the riots as a “crisis for the nonviolent [civil rights] movement,” raising fundamental questions about its ability to confront black disadvantage in inner cities, generate a meaningful constituency among urban black youth, or discipline the passions and disobedience it had unleashed into black civic life.<sup>53</sup> With mainstream civil rights movement organizations suffering a crisis of legitimacy, Carmichael sought to claim the newly black inner cities and rebellious ghettos as Black Power constituencies, seizing the fundamentally inchoate and inarticulate spectacle of black urban revolt to level an influential set of radical and populist criticisms of civil rights liberalism (SS, 17).

With *Black Power* (1967), cowritten with political scientist Charles Hamilton, Carmichael helped generate and systematize a fundamental challenge to the social and political theory upon which the mainstream civil rights insurgency proceeded, attacking the class politics of civil rights liberalism, integrationism, and nonviolence. The singularly important theoretical contribution of the book, which has become so influential as to become axiomatic for most left-leaning discourse on racial justice, is the idea of “institutional racism.” As the concept of “racism,” which first emerged as an attempt to describe the systematic nature of Nazi racist doctrine and policy, moved into the US cultural milieu, it quickly came to connote “attitudinal” and individualist features of the racial order: intentional discrimination, prejudicial judgments, and malicious sentiment.<sup>54</sup> Carmichael and Hamilton, explicitly criticizing Gunnar Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* (1944), suggested that such moralist formulations had lost sight of racism’s *function* or *purpose*, which is “*subordinating* a racial group and maintaining control over that group” (BP, 3).

“Racism,” Carmichael argues, “is not primarily a problem of ‘human relations’ but of an exploitation maintained—either actively or through silence—by the society as a whole” (SS, 29). These functions of subordination and exploitation, however, can occur relatively covertly, as part of the background “operation of anti-black attitudes and practices” *within* institutions, and not simply as individual, overt acts of purposive discrimination or malice (BP, 4–5). The controversial appeal of the institutional racism concept is that it promises to explain how a policy or practice “that is race-neutral in its content and public rationale . . . nevertheless has a significant or disproportionate negative impact on an unfairly disadvantaged racial group” that is unjust.<sup>55</sup> Or, as Carmichael puts the point, “when unidentified

53 Martin Luther King Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: Grand Central, 2001), 296.

54 Leah N. Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice: The Rise of Racial Individualism in Midcentury America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

55 Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 24.

white terrorists bomb a black church . . . that is an act of individual racism. . . . But when in that same city, Birmingham, Alabama, not five but five hundred black babies die each year because of lack of proper food, shelter, and medical facilities . . . that is a function of institutionalized racism" (SS, 79).

With some conceptual reconstruction, it is clear that Carmichael and Hamilton argue that the ostensibly "normal" or "rational" workings of institutional logics within an antiblack normative order are inevitably pathological and will reproduce, or at least obscure through "mystification," unjust patterns of black disadvantage and white advantage (SS, 79). Institutional racism will depend upon, and entrench in institutional practices, *epistemic ignorance* about the origins and character of black disadvantage, a *disquieting ease* or *habituated blindness* toward black suffering, *psychic and material interests* in reproducing racial hierarchy, and *affective attachments and fears* that motivate aversive behavior toward blacks and antiblack forms of political and social solidarity.<sup>56</sup>

In advancing their incredibly influential distinction between "individual" and "institutional" antiblack racism, however, it is too rarely noted that Carmichael and Hamilton equated institutional racism with *colonialism* (BP, 5). Already skeptical of social theories that conceptualized the problem of black oppression as intentional civic exclusion that needed to be overcome with principled civic inclusion, Carmichael soon rejected the idea that concepts like "citizenship," "prejudice," and "desegregation" were as relevant as *colonialism* for theorizing the American racial order at all. While Malcolm X and other black nationalists had long pilloried the idea that African Americans were "citizens" in the thick sense of mutual solidarity, destiny, and recognition that might ensure their formal legal rights were not arbitrarily violated, Carmichael and Hamilton were among an influential group of intellectuals who drew upon anticolonial thinkers like Frantz Fanon to charge that blacks—especially in the ghettos—were not just noncitizens but an *internally colonized people* whose oppression is characterized along two broad axes: (1) economic exploitation and political domination and (2) cultural imperialism and psychological degradation (BP, 5).<sup>57</sup>

56 Carmichael and Hamilton's particular conception of institutional racism draws on Herbert Blumer's influential sociological theory of group position, which argues that people's judgments (e.g., proprietary claims), affective responses (e.g., fear), expectations (e.g., stereotypes), and decisions (e.g., hiring, voting) are deeply influenced, in part, by "historically and collectively developed judgments about the positions in the social order that in-group members should rightfully occupy relative to members of an out-group." For Blumer (as well as his contemporary disciples, including Lawrence Bobo and Vincent Hutchings), "the longer the history of relations between dominant and subordinate group members [exists], the more fully crystallized is the sense of relative group position." Carmichael and Hamilton insist that slavery was of particular significance in fixing the subordinate group position of blacks. "No other minority group in this country," they write, "was ever treated as legal property" (BP, 25). Lawrence Bobo and Vincent Hutchings, "Perceptions of Racial Group Competition: Extending Blumer's Theory of Group Position to a Multiracial Social Context," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 6 (December 1996): 955–57.

57 See, for example, Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York: William Morrow, 1967); Huey P. Newton, *The Huey P.*

America, Carmichael declared, was an “octopus of exploitation” by which “a powerful few have been maintained and enriched at the expense of the poor and voiceless colored masses” (SS, 23). While conceding that African Americans have always lived amid whites and never held sovereign or distinct territory, Carmichael and Hamilton emphasize, at length, the *imposed territorial and geographic distinctiveness* of black ghettos. Ghettos are demarcated in the popular imaginary largely by racial stigma, but structurally, Carmichael and Hamilton argued, they are produced and reproduced through a political and economic powerlessness analogous to colonial “dependency” (SS, 37–39).

While ghettos cannot be said to be a source of cheaply extracted *natural* resources, Carmichael and Hamilton identify how ghettoization helps generate, or serves as a path of least resistance to, other domains of profit and value, including surplus labor, inflated rents and real estate costs, exploitative consumer outlets, and administrative jobs (welfare caseworkers, police, etc.) to manage and supervise the ghetto poor. Instead of direct usurpation by a foreign government, however, residential segregation, gerrymandering, and concentrated poverty combine to concentrate political power and hoard resources, commercial spaces, and social services for whites (BP, 9, 15–19, 146–62; SS, 86).<sup>58</sup> Even black political leaders, Carmichael and Hamilton charge—echoing colonialist theories of “indirect” rule—are culturally alienated from the black “masses” and so reliant upon white-held capital, white philanthropy, or white media elites that they are primarily responsive to *these* interests rather than those of their black constituencies (BP, 31–32; RR, 542–44).

These populist charges against black elites rely on a creative appropriation of Frantz Fanon’s psychosocial theories, with Carmichael arguing that colonialism produces profound cultural and psychological damage, in part to ensure the submission of the colonized (SS, 120). Channeling Fanon through midcentury social science and black nationalist cultural criticism, Carmichael and Hamilton argued that blacks themselves are prone to internalizing the pervasive antiblack stigma of the broader society, instilling severe doubts about black cultural practices and even blacks’ “worth as human beings,” making black “self-respect . . . almost impossible” (BP, 29). This internalized stigmatization and its commensurate shame, Carmichael argued, could be seen in everything from the broad lack of knowledge or appreciation for black intellectual achievement, to the thirst for assimilation among black elites, to “black-on-black” crime, and, especially, to antiblack beauty standards and practices (e.g., colorism, hair straightening, and skin bleaching).<sup>59</sup>

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*Newton Reader*, ed. David Hilliard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories, 2002); Cleaver, *Post-prison Writings and Speeches*.

<sup>58</sup> Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 9, 15–19, 146–62. To this one might add the problem of mobility in areas where public transit is difficult to access or afford.

<sup>59</sup> A severely underappreciated contribution by Carmichael to the Black Power movement is his critique of antiblackness in aesthetics, especially bodily aesthetics. See, for example, “A

Against this “cultural terrorism,” Carmichael and Hamilton contended that the “basic need” of blacks is “to reclaim our history and our identity” through a “struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves and our relationship to the society, *and to have these terms recognized*” (BP, 34–35, emphasis added). In this regard they may rightly be seen as early and influential proponents of what has become popularly known as “the politics of recognition” or “identity politics.”<sup>60</sup>

While Carmichael spoke of blacks needing to “embody our own cultural patterns” and championed an ideal of black cultural particularity, he never developed (unlike W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Anna Julia Cooper, Albert Murray, Ralph Ellison, Angela Davis, or Toni Morrison) an original cultural philosophy or criticism (SS, 63). He wrote, at times passionately, about the need for black people to refuse assimilation into “middle-class America” so as not to imbibe noxious values of “material aggrandizement” and xenophobia (BP, 41). Even compared to other prominent cultural nationalists (e.g., Harold Cruse, Amiri Baraka, Ron Karenga), however, Carmichael’s paeans to black culture and identity never included a sophisticated cultural anthropology, any comprehensive work of cultural or aesthetic criticism, or even a critical theory of the culture industry.<sup>61</sup> Carmichael’s Black Power-era hopes for African American cultural particularity as a source of ethical content to resist racial oppression is based less on an attempt to actually distill such content from the interpretation of existing cultural practices than on a quasi-existentialist faith that such a “culture” might soon be forged from the concerted, collective effort of black political self-assertion. This approach to black cultural identity reveals, one imagines, that Carmichael’s purported interests in “culture” lay primarily in its supposed utility in an assault on black shame and for cultivating black solidarity.

Thus Carmichael’s ruminations on culture focus most intensely on criticism of white supremacist or ethnocentric evaluations of putatively “black” forms of cultural achievement or beauty, and historical narratives that obscure achievements and struggles of people of African descent (SS, 108–9). To combat the ill social and psychological effects of these inferiorizing representations, Carmichael

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New World to Build” in *Stokely Speaks*, esp. 147. In addition to his rhetorical skill and charisma, Carmichael’s celebration of darker skin tones and “natural” (i.e., not chemically straightened) hair had been a consistent feature of his thought since college and gained symbolic import in the wake of his marriage to the South African singer Miriam Makeba, who famously wore her hair natural in an era where very few public black women did so. I am grateful to Shatema Threadcraft for this point. On the persistence of colorism in American society, see Ellis Monk, “The Cost of Color: Skin Color, Discrimination, and Health among African Americans,” *American Journal of Sociology* 121, no. 2 (September 2015): 396–444.

<sup>60</sup> For the classic statement, see Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>61</sup> Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*; LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Perennial, 1999); Maulana Karenga, *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis* (San Diego, CA: Kawaida, 1978).

assumed that “we must define what we are—and then move from our definitions and tell them, Recognize what we say we are” (SS, 65).

Such solutions to the problem of social and cultural stigma, however, have come under fire in recent years. Critics of the “recognition” paradigm accuse thinkers like Carmichael of attempting to impose sovereign control or static content on the fundamentally open and dialogical character of social identities, especially obscuring the *intra*racial power dynamics that produce dominant scripts and interpretation of “authentic” black identity.<sup>62</sup> Others worry that the politics of recognition attaches group identity perpetually to a stance of weakness or injury, or promotes conceptions of cultural identity that are essentialist or otherwise ontologically confused (e.g., a sleight-of-hand conflation of culture with race, or ascribing a metaphysical presence to “blackness”).<sup>63</sup> Carmichael, who approvingly describes “the power to define” identity as a form of “mastery” and who threatens that those who reject black self-definition must “fall by the wayside,” seems especially vulnerable to these objections (SS, 65–66). Yet while critics have rightly castigated Black Power’s rhetoric of racial authenticity for running roughshod over individuality and reasonable pluralism, it would be a mistake to deny the profoundly important and liberating “unmasking” of racist ideology and provincializing of “Eurocentric” cultural norms that Black Power occasioned in domains ranging from academic disciplinary boundaries to linguistic stigma to aesthetic and beauty standards.

Beyond putting culture in the service of critique, Carmichael treats a shared, collective cultural identity as a necessary ground for political solidarity among ethnic groups, which he argues are the fundamental units of analysis and significance in American life. Placing Carmichael’s earlier admonitions against joining coalitions without effective, independent power within a theory of American society writ large, *Black Power* describes America as a fundamentally “pluralistic society” where “group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength” (BP, 44).

To bolster this argument, Carmichael and Hamilton turn to an unlikely source: the history of ethnic machine politics in urban America. In doing so they drew upon political scientists like Robert Dahl and the “pluralist” school of American politics, which influentially argued that American society was not governed by a single concentrated “power elite” but that inequalities in power were in fact “dispersed” such that patterns of political authority were constituted by group contestation (ethnic groups, social classes, associations, etc.) over the control of

62 See, for example, Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, or K. Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

63 See, for example, Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), and Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

resources and the exercise of political power.<sup>64</sup> On Dahl's account, ethnic groups were an especially important category of analysis, insofar as ethnicity-based political appeals and ethnic machine politics were *historically* central to urban development, the assimilation of immigrants, and, most importantly, the distribution of economic opportunities (patronage jobs, municipal contracts, etc.).<sup>65</sup> Carmichael and Hamilton suggested that this history contained the central lesson of American politics: groups that exhibit solidarity, self-defense, and mutual trust eventually rise to power and flourish economically, politically, and culturally (*BP*, 46).

A closer look reveals a tension, however, between *Black Power's* normative claims about group solidarity and its social-scientific claims about the workings of American politics and society. While insisting on the exceptionalist character of black oppression with the concept of "internal colonization," Carmichael and Hamilton then drift, implausibly, to what the historian Peniel Joseph rightly describes as a "surprisingly parochial . . . portrayal of Black Power as simply the latest variant of America's long history of ethnic pluralism."<sup>66</sup> This drift is made even more shocking by Carmichael and Hamilton's argument elsewhere in the book, at odds with Dahlian pluralism, that "when faced with demands from black people," what could once be plausibly described as differentiated ethnic pluralism among whites "quickly becomes a monolithic structure on issues of race" (*BP*, 7).

As Jennifer Hochschild has written, Dahl and his followers implausibly assimilated the *racial* divide between blacks and whites to an *ethnic* one (e.g., Irish and Italians), fundamentally misunderstanding the enduring, spatially concentrated disadvantage of the black ghetto or the ways that racial domination made some of its repressive consequences for thought, action, and dissent invisible behind the veil of ostensibly "private" choices.<sup>67</sup> Further, Dahl and the pluralists treated "assimilation" in an unhelpfully abstract fashion, ignoring how in the US racial order the "assimilation" of white ethnic groups can best be understood as a renegotiation and expansion of the boundaries of white identity, and a mobilization of white solidarity against black justice claims.<sup>68</sup> Thus by Carmichael and Hamilton's own invocation of Blumer's relational sociology or the theory of internal colonization, the self-assertion and independent organization of blacks along "ethnic" lines should not have been expected to ensure the addition of blacks to a vibrant pluralist competition. Instead it should have been expected to cause a

64 Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

65 Dean Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 90–91.

66 Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour*, 200.

67 Jennifer Hochschild, "Robert Dahl: Scholar, Teacher, and Democrat," *Journal of Political Power* 8, no. 2 (May 2015): 167–74.

68 See, for example, Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).



broad *dissolution* of politicized white ethnicities into a less *ethnically differentiated* politics of white *racial* solidarity that is, with varying degrees of explicit racism, motivated to resist the demands or incorporation of African Americans.

In addition to this theoretical tension, Carmichael and Hamilton's call to "close ranks" has also received increasingly popular criticism from scholars in Africana philosophy, feminist theory, and political science. These critics argue that *Black Power's* vision of black solidarity runs roughshod over the diversity of interests *among* African Americans, especially on issues of gender, sexuality, class, and religion, where differentiation between blacks makes expectations of unity objectionable or implausible.<sup>69</sup> Not simply a conceptual confusion, the "close ranks" call also is criticized for its *disciplinary* implications across a broad range of human practices. In a political culture where the *expectation* is that blacks close ranks and share a unified political agenda (especially one beyond fighting antiblack racism) or, more stringently, that such politics demands that blacks be devoted to sustaining intergenerational ethnic identification within the group (through endogamy, fidelity to "black" culture, living in black neighborhoods, etc.), these contemporary scholars argue that Black Power can become near tyrannical toward those who raise cross-cutting cleavage issues (e.g., marriage equality, prison abolition) or who seek to express their individuality in ways that deviate from group scripts (e.g., *SS*, 74–75).

This *presumption* of shared ethnic identity and corporate black interests, critics argue, serves only to naturalize or mystify what is, in fact, the arbitrary success of some elites in enshrining their particular interpretation of black interests or identity as authoritative.<sup>70</sup> In another irony of Black Power political thought, this objection is similar to the critique that Black Power militants themselves lodged against integrationist civil rights leadership. In 1966, for example, foregrounding the grinding poverty of the rural South and the urban ghettos, Carmichael lamented how "civil rights protest has not materially benefited the masses of Negroes." The movement's benefits, he charged, primarily accrued to more middle-class blacks who already met the standard "criteria for upward mobility" with wealth, education, and powerful social networks (*SS*, 10–11).<sup>71</sup> While leftists in

69 Cathy Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," *Du Bois Review* 1, no. 1 (March 2004): 27–45; Cedric Johnson, *From Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Eddie Glaude Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); E. Frances White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*.

70 Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*.

71 While five decades later, economic historians have demonstrated that the civil rights revolution brought far more significant financial and educational benefits to southern blacks than Black Power critics expected or appreciated at the time, it remains true nevertheless that civil rights legislation had a far more marginal impact on the black ghetto poor, whose disadvantages did not involve formal, categorical exclusion or disenfranchisement. Gavin Wright, *Sharing the*

the movement, including King, echoed these criticisms and encouraged a radical challenge to postwar capitalism and economic inequality, Carmichael insisted that the class biases of the movement were inextricably tied to its “integrationist” political and social philosophy.<sup>72</sup> “Only the bourgeoisie,” Carmichael charged, “are in a position to be concerned about public accommodations” (SS, 102).

The key difference, however, is that their populist critique of elite “integrationist” rhetoric did not want to deconstruct the very idea of a black “general will” but instead install them as the “authentic” tribunes of the group’s interests, or figure the black “masses” as the “authentic” voice of black political struggle. Still, underneath the excesses of their populist rhetoric, Carmichael and Hamilton did disclose important theoretical and practical lacunae in the development of the integrationist tradition concerning its (1) implicit individualism, (2) ironic reification of racial stigma, (3) cultural costs, and (4) subtle coercions.

Could integration, Carmichael asked, really be a “practical goal not for individuals *but entire communities*” (RR, 530, emphasis added)? The individualist presuppositions of integrationism, he contends, “allows the nation to focus on a handful of Southern children who get into white schools, at great price, and to ignore the 94 percent who are left behind in unimproved all-black schools” (SS, 23). One could not indulge the fantasy that there would be “a wholesale migration from South Side Chicago to Cicero” (RR, 539). If integration means removing barriers to black *individuals’* participation in mainstream institutions and social life without fundamental changes to them, then inclusion would largely siphon off only an emergent black elite into predominantly white institutions.

This “one-way street” integration, as Carmichael witheringly called it, only serves to reproduce the stigma that “‘white’ is automatically better and ‘black’ is by definition inferior” (RR, 23). Under the aegis of cultivating cultural capital or otherwise assimilating to mainstream norms, Carmichael argues that integrationism likewise extracts an unacceptable “cultural suicide” and cost to self-respect (RR, 531). Where integration calls for “the Negro to foreswear his identity as a Negro,” Carmichael demands that blacks preserve, with “integrity,” their unique “racial and cultural personality” (BP, 55). Not only is such pride and identification foundational to healthy psychological development and political solidarity, he insists, but it also provides a situated identity through which blacks might resist “white” ideological compulsions to “Anglo-conformity” and racist stigma in culture, materialism in economics, and imperialism in foreign policy (BP, 62–63; SS, 81–83).

In addition to intensifying discrimination against those “left behind,” this class-stratified antiblack stigma (a “ghetto” stigma) has the pernicious consequences of undermining black self-esteem, faith in black civic agency, and the

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*Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

72 Martin Luther King Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 18.

resources available in neighborhoods now marked by concentrations of blacks and poverty. This mode of integration, according to Carmichael, only deepens a pathological parvenuism and obsession with assimilation that is especially intense among black elites (SS, 63–64). By contrast, Carmichael does gesture toward the possibility of “two-way street” integration, by which he means an immense investment in, and empowerment of, predominantly black neighborhoods, which would make the choice of living within an integrated community less coercive. Otherwise such choices would be unduly burdened by considerations about concentrated poverty, crime, institutional depletion, and the like (SS, 63–64; 88). Instead of developing the idea of “two-way street” integration, however, Carmichael threw his support behind movements for “black community control” of schools and other institutions (BP, 167–71).

Reflecting the deep tensions between the social theory of internal colonization and the political theory of ethnic pluralism, Carmichael’s defenses of “community control” veered from old-fashioned localism and analogies drawn from suburban politics (BP, 171) toward a more nationalist rhetoric of “self-determination” and attempts to draw both rhetorical and practical connections to anti-imperialist movements for national liberation (SS, 104). At its most extreme, Carmichael imagined community control so robust that it would essentially carve out exceptional territories where blacks themselves, having forcefully seized control of the police and courts, would enforce law and execute punishment, including meting out the death penalty for crimes like rape (SS, 211, 215–16).

### **The Longing for Total Revolution: From the Black Power Revolt to Pan-Africanism**

Unsurprisingly, a wide array of black intellectuals drew inspiration from revolutionary struggles to uproot colonial domination, having long recognized the ideological and political resonance between the American racial order and Western imperialism.<sup>73</sup> For Carmichael, however, who came to political maturity after the Bandung (or Afro-Asian) Conference between newly independent, “non-aligned” nations in 1955, and amidst the breakneck pace of anti-imperial revolution in the 1960s, there was a sense of possibility that global solidarity among oppressed nonwhite peoples might amount to something more concrete than the “golden age” of black nationalism (1850–1925) had managed to achieve.<sup>74</sup>

One powerful consequence of the colonial analogy was that it unsettled the

73 See, for example, Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: The Unfinished Struggle for Race and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

74 Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). As Moses makes clear, the post-World War II nationalist revival reversed much of the anti-African stigma and civilizationist logic of classical black nationalism, which repeated European prejudices against African peoples.

cognitive “banisters” of black radical thought from methodological and epistemological American nationalism. “Rich, gluttonous, smug, self-satisfied, short-sighted America,” Carmichael declared, “was really not, as it imagined itself to be, the center of the universe” (RR, 608). In the thrall of the internal colony metaphor and the fervent optimism of Third World revolutionaries, Carmichael passionately declared that “there is only one place for black Americans . . . and that is on the side of the Third World” (BP, xix). He spent the rest of his life fleshing out the character and foundation of this transnational Third World solidarity, offering three overlapping visions: (1) a solidaristic anti-imperialism and critique of US “national security citizenship,” (2) violent black revolutionary struggle, and (3) a worldwide Pan-African movement for black liberation. The last he would advocate to his death, and long past the peak of his influence on black political life.

#### ANTI-IMPERIALISM

By 1967, after barely a year as SNCC’s chairman, Carmichael was pushed to vacate the position. Black Power (as well as a controversial statement against Zionism) had brought down a devastating philanthropic backlash against SNCC, and Carmichael’s growing recklessness and flamboyance in media appearances exacerbated organizational infighting and intrigue. Most infamously, members of the clandestine black nationalist sect Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) hijacked SNCC’s 1966 staff retreat in Upstate New York in the name of ideological purity, pushing through, via rage and resignation, a resolution to expel the handful of remaining white staffers from SNCC.<sup>75</sup>

Yet, as Nikhil Pal Singh reminds us, nationalist discourse tends to connect “honored individuals *within* the nation-state and a privileged series of ‘family resemblances’ and ‘special relationships’ beyond national borders.”<sup>76</sup> While SNCC imploded in the wake of his chairmanship, Carmichael, freed of official administrative responsibilities and now a notorious international political celebrity, embarked on an impromptu world tour to cultivate these “special relationships” abroad and spread the message of Black Power. Traveling to England, Cuba, the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam, Algeria, and Guinea, Carmichael met a bewildering array of militant activists and revolutionary leaders, including Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, C. L. R. James, and Shirley Graham Du Bois. Thrown headlong into this world of subversive underground diplomacy on behalf of an erstwhile black “nation,” Carmichael gradually collapsed the distinctions between African American insurgency and anti-imperial revolution. At the 1967 Organi-

75 Carmichael would seek to distance himself from this decision in the coming years, but his proposed compromise as chairman—that black staffers organize in black communities and whites in white communities—was closer to the hardline nationalists than to the old SNCC mantra of “black and white together.”

76 Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 35–36.

zation of Latin American Solidarity (OLAS) conference in Havana, for example, Carmichael proclaimed, ostensibly on behalf of African Americans, that “we share with you a common struggle . . . a common enemy. Our enemy is white Western imperialist society. Our struggle is to overthrow this system that feeds itself and expands itself through the economic and cultural exploitation of nonwhite, non-Western peoples—of the third world” (RR, 589).

This appeal to common oppression, enemies, and struggle blends together multiple accounts of nonwhite world solidarity. On one dimension, it hypothesizes a shared subjection based on the claim that beneath patently distinct forms of colonialism and racial domination there exists a shared morphology or ideological core—the denial of the capacity or right to self-government—as well as a commonly responsible agent (“white Western imperialist society”; SS, 106). Beyond this resonance, Carmichael argued that colonialism abroad helps sustain racial hierarchy at home by allowing imperial states to redistribute the spoils of expropriated wealth and exploited labor abroad to white workers in exchange for their compliance (SS, 91).

On another, less totalizing view, nonwhite solidarity is actually partial and emerges from *anti-imperialist praxis*, those concrete political relationships and theoretical insights forged by (neo)colonial subjects enacting resistance to the usurpation of their claims to self-determination, especially on racial or cultural grounds. When discussing *this* form of nonwhite solidarity, Carmichael often suggested that imperial rule plants the seeds of its own undoing. Empires conscript their subjects from one corner of the globe for the suppression of others, but instead they discover new ideas and alliances (RR, 605, 613).<sup>77</sup>

Carmichael’s aspiration to so-called Third World solidarity, and the claim that African Americans were colonized subjects, inevitably conflicted with duties and prerogatives the US officially demands of its ostensible citizens, including military service. Nowhere was this conflict more urgent than in the case of conscription and the American war in Vietnam. A leading force in SNCC’s decision to become the first major civil rights organization to oppose the war, Carmichael also became one of the first major black political figures to publicly encourage draft resistance. Breaking with the long tradition of what Aziz Rana has derisively called an ideal of “national security citizenship” in African American political thought, Carmichael heaped scorn upon those who called for enthusiastic black participation in the first major fully integrated US combat force as a way of demonstrating blacks’ fitness for civic recognition and standing.<sup>78</sup>

77 Thus Carmichael reports of meeting, in his travels, Algerian troops who participated in the French occupation of Vietnam being radicalized by the experience, Cuban emissaries devoting themselves to African liberation movements, and, in his own case, African American activist-travelers enacting their own ad hoc diplomacy on behalf of an oppressed people with liberation movements and national leaders around the world.

78 Aziz Rana, “Against National Security Citizenship,” in *Fifty Years since MLK*, ed. Brandon M. Terry (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press / Boston Review, 2018).

Against this impulse, Carmichael rightly pressed the argument that if an ostensibly liberal democratic state denies fair rights of participation and suffrage to its subjects for arbitrary, unjust reasons (i.e., antiblack racism), or they languish at the bottom of a structurally and intergenerationally unjust social order, it is legitimate to reject the reciprocal obligations of military service (*RR*, 447). Indeed Carmichael went further, arguing that if black Americans were to volunteer, or acquiesce to conscription, even under the threat of incarceration, they would essentially become *mercenaries*—soldiers for whom national belonging, just cause, and cooperative self-defense were immaterial to the military violence they dispensed (*SS*, 53).

#### REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE

In a mix of enthusiasm for Third World revolutions and urban rebellion, as well as his judgment that in light of blacks' colonial status, ostensible civic demands to obey the law or otherwise cooperate were not binding, Carmichael was often supportive of violent resistance to racial oppression. In his early career this was confined mostly to championing collective self-defense (*RR*, 303, 474). As Black Power grew in notoriety, however, Carmichael's statements on question of violence became more provocative and ambiguous, often celebrating the ghetto rebellions of the mid-1960s as legitimate and productive forms of anticapitalist and anti-imperial disruption (*SS*, 87, 103). Clearly dismissing the idea of nonviolence as a *duty*, Carmichael terrified and titillated audiences by declaring that "a 'non-violent' approach to civil rights is an approach black people cannot afford and a luxury white people do not deserve" (*BP*, 53).

Such claims drew the swift opprobrium of critics. Martin Luther King lamented how the "semantics" of Black Power were entangled with intimations of violence.<sup>79</sup> Even the nationalist cultural critic Harold Cruse thought Carmichael's talk of revolutionary violence needlessly contradicted the essentially reformist and redistributive proposals of Black Power advocates.<sup>80</sup>

Yet instead of retreating, Carmichael joined many in the Black Power generation when, by 1968, his ambivalence about violence toppled into more uncompromising revolutionary rhetoric.<sup>81</sup> Partly provoking this turn was the horror of King's assassination, after which Carmichael proclaimed:

When [white America] killed Dr. King last night, she killed all reasonable hope. . . . He was the one man in our race who was trying to teach our people to have love,

79 Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community*, Beacon Press ed. (Boston: Beacon, 2010), 30.

80 Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 248–52.

81 For example, see Eldridge Cleaver, "Credo for Rioters and Looters" (San Francisco: Black Panther Party, 1969).

compassion, and mercy for what white people have done. When white America killed Dr. King last night, she declared war on us. . . . The rebellions that have been occurring around this country is just light stuff to what is about to happen. We have to retaliate for the death of our leaders. The execution of those deaths will not be in the courtrooms, they're going to be in the streets of the United States of America. . . . There no longer needs to be intellectual discussions. Black people know that they have to get guns.<sup>82</sup>

In other respects, however, this dynamic found forward motion in the early mutual admiration between Carmichael and the Black Panther Party (BPP), whose founders, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, were inspired by the LCFO and Carmichael's "Black Power" declaration.

Like Carmichael, the Panthers also endorsed the internal colonization thesis and argued against national security citizenship, claiming that black men should be exempt from military service that asks them "to defend a racist government that does not protect us" or to "kill other people of color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America."<sup>83</sup> And while the Panthers made the idea of the ghetto "lumpenproletariat" as revolutionary vanguard central to their philosophy and public profile, Carmichael also spoke in this era of disaffected ghetto youth as the "true revolutionaries" of an American society incapable of producing justice absent a violent upheaval (SS, 107).<sup>84</sup>

By 1968 Carmichael would accept "induction" as the BPP's honorary prime minister of Afro-America and briefly become one of the most important Panther spokespersons during the frenetic "Free Huey" campaign launched in the wake of Newton's arrest on charges of murdering an Oakland police officer and the attempted murder of another. For Carmichael and others in SNCC, the Panthers represented the only successful movement organizing the most alienated and disaffected ghetto youth besides the "apolitical and fundamentalist" Nation of Islam. For the Panthers, allying with SNCC leaders promised organizing experience, more mainstream legitimacy, and a roster of well-known activists, including Carmichael, who threw the full force of his charisma into talk of revolution.

In an especially combative speech at the February 17, 1968, Free Huey rally in Oakland, Carmichael spoke explicitly of preparing for "revolutionary warfare" and warned of "maximum damage" in retaliation against police and property if

82 "Stokely Carmichael Warns of Retaliation in the Streets for the Murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. [4/5/1968]," Associated Press archive, November 16, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4oBxMjObwQ>.

83 "The Black Panther Party Platform and Program: What We Want, What We Believe," *Black Panther*, November 23, 1967, 3.

84 Eldridge Cleaver, "On Lumpen Ideology," *Black Scholar* 4, no. 3 (November-December 1972): 2-10.

Newton was sentenced to death (SS, 125). Marrying his long-standing call for black unity with the unforgiving imperatives of revolution, Carmichael even threatened those blacks judged to be collaborators or “Uncle Toms” with summary execution: “All of the Uncle Toms are *ours*. . . . We’re gonna *try* to bring them home; and if they don’t come home, we gonna off them, that’s all” (SS, 115). Such posturing, supposedly justified by the revolutionary crisis situation at hand, revealed the self-undermining and repressive features of any conflation of *racial* unity with *ideological* purity.

Indeed Carmichael found himself quickly on the wrong end of demands for ideological fealty. Later that year, his short-lived alliance with the BPP degenerated into what he later (perhaps too kindly) called a “comedy of errors,” as serious disagreements over interracial alliances, vanguard politics, and cultural nationalism surfaced between Carmichael and BPP leadership. By 1969, amid personal attacks, philosophical criticism, and threats of execution, Carmichael publicly “resigned” from the Panthers.

These disputes represent a significant moment in the intellectual history of black radicalism. Among the Panthers, especially those on the West Coast subject to Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver’s influence, the principled commitment to interracial alliances was paramount. The BPP often claimed the role of, or was described as, the vanguard insurgent force of a broader, multiracial New Left movement against late capitalism, racial hierarchy, alienation, and social oppression on various axes. Cleaver and Newton, in particular, imagined that the rampant automation and militarism of late capitalism and imperialism would unite the growing ranks of the dispossessed across racial and national boundaries in a movement sparked by black radical action.

Carmichael, in contrast, spoke ever more categorically of the implausibility of white redemption and the limits of black-white alliances, going so far as to suggest that automation and the end of the industrial economy was more likely to produce black genocide than an interracial Left alliance (SS, 112–13). By 1968, Carmichael would argue that racism took moral and political precedence over economic injustice, uniting blacks qua blacks. Casting suspicion on white allies, littering his speeches with antiwhite epithets (e.g., “honky”), and defending feelings of anti-white anger and even “hatred,” Carmichael contended that while white workers fought only for redistribution and wealth, African Americans were engaged in a more fundamental and inevitably conflicting struggle for the recognition of their humanity and the realization of their dignity (SS, 120–21).

Cleaver rightly unmasked such crowd-pleasing rhetoric with brutal economy. Carmichael’s calls for black unity and closed ranks across class and ideological divisions drowned important moral and political distinctions between allies in inchoate appeals to black solidarity. Anticipating the now well-developed body of left criticisms of Black Power, Cleaver mocked Carmichael’s contention that Black Power could not be co-opted, noting that it had, within three years, become



a slogan for black capitalist entrepreneurship and been endorsed by the Nixon administration and a newly integrated black middle class. Predicting the moral compromises that would mar Carmichael's thirty years among African statesmen, Cleaver also charged that a "close ranks" solidarity and racial reasoning would blind black radicals even to the victims of dictators like Papa Doc Duvalier in Haiti and Mobutu Sese Seko in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Admitting that the incessant repetition of terms like "Capitalism, Imperialism and Racism" can obscure the "grisly realities behind them," Cleaver pleaded that "when you see the squalor in which people live as a result of the policies of the exploiters . . . you should know that suffering is colorblind." Revolutionaries, Cleaver argued, need "unity based on revolutionary principles rather than skin color."<sup>85</sup>

Revolutionaries did not, perhaps, need to be suicidal. Carmichael, less enamored with the New Left than Cleaver, recognized how white radicals projected onto the BPP fantastical images of them as the "black shock troops of the white New Left and the 'counterculture,'" and judged the Panthers' embrace of such rhetoric as "a fundamental error" (BP, 663). Drawing from his organizing background, Carmichael thought these representations, and the Panthers' own reliance on police patrols and uncivil speech, played into "the left's revolutionary fantasy" and the "right's racist nightmare," and alienated the BPP from "the adult community they were supposed to be organizing." Without a stable black working-class adult base, Carmichael argued, the Panthers would become "more and more of an urban youth formation . . . not far enough removed from the classic urban street-gang model" and thus destined to implode (RR, 663). The "theatrical militance and high visibility" of BPP political performance, Carmichael rightly argued, fueled both its unprecedented media attention *and* the utter hostility it received from law enforcement agencies far and wide. Provoking this level of antagonism from police and intelligence agencies, Carmichael claimed, put the BPP in an impossible position. Police and FBI subterfuge and sabotage worked so effectively on the Panthers in part because of their weak ties of trust, norms of suspicion and retribution associated with street gang norms, and broad association with illegitimate violence and delusional martyrdom (RR, 665–666). "Far as I was concerned," Carmichael coldly joked, "'revolutionary vanguard' was just another name for black cannon fodder" (RR, 664).

#### PAN-AFRICANISM AND KWAME TURE

Although Carmichael criticized the Panthers' "irresponsible" vanguardism and ideological alienation from "the masses" (RR, 668), even sympathetic commenta-

<sup>85</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, "An Open Letter to Stokely Carmichael," *Black Panther* 3, no. 17 (August 16, 1969): 5.

tors have described his turn to Pan-Africanism over the last decades of his career in similar terms.<sup>86</sup> On his 1967 visit to Guinea, Carmichael was first introduced to Sekou Touré, the anticolonial statesman and first president of independent Guinea; Kwame Nkrumah, the deposed president of Ghana and the leading post-war theorist of Pan-Africanism; and his future wife, the famous South African singer Miriam Makeba. These three icons—especially Nkrumah, who successfully invited Carmichael to study under him as his political secretary—helped turn Carmichael’s political thinking and attention toward participation in Pan-Africanist revolutionary movements on the continent (RR, 624). By 1969, besieged by the FBI, threatened by the BPP, and thrown out of SNCC, Carmichael left the US for Guinea, where he would change his name to Kwame Ture in honor of his mentors and live out the rest of his life longing for Pan-African revolution.

From this period onward, Carmichael became a fervent disciple of Nkrumah’s eclectic blend of Marxist-Leninism and Pan-Africanism. His shift to Nkrumahism came during a time when Carmichael privately felt a profound sense of inadequacy in his analyses and approaches to politics, and a worry that Black Power community control could not succeed at present (SS, 177, 185). Carmichael’s sense of post-Jim Crow America as a newly reconstituted oppressive social order found echoes in Nkrumah, who famously argued that Africa had thrown off the yoke of formal imperial rule only to see domination remade as “neocolonialism,” where the prerogatives of self-government claimed by independent postcolonial nations are, in fact, *usurped* through practices of international finance capital, military and covert surveillance operations (e.g., assassination, coups d’états), and global political marginalization. In order to resist political, economic, and ideological coercion from abroad, Nkrumah argued, the African continent must be “under an All-African Union Government”—complete with common currency, central banking, unified military, and socialist government.<sup>87</sup> Socialism, Nkrumah argued, would entail the “restitution of Africa’s humanist and egalitarian principles of society” and “restatements in [a] contemporary idiom” of the principles underlying traditional forms of African “communalism.”<sup>88</sup>

On Nkrumah’s account, neocolonialism is fundamentally buttressed by coercive economic pressures masquerading as “free” trade and “propaganda” that holds the postcolonial “masses” in the grip of “imperialist dogmas.” When not subject to bribery or extortion, the postcolonial imagination suffers, Nkrumah insisted, from thinking “western democracy and the parliamentary system are the only valid ways of governing,” that only capitalism and dense investment networks with European and US corporations can produce economic development,

86 Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour*, 276–305.

87 Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (New York: International, 1970).

88 Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-colonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review, 1964), 74–77.

that blacks are incapable of self-government, or that the administrative boundaries or “national” identities inherited from colonialism are “fair and sacred” enough to be the foundation of a new political order.<sup>89</sup>

Given the vast scope of ideological unity seemingly entailed by his Pan-Africanism, and his suspicion that imperial subversion lurks behind many otherwise reasonable forms of association and argument, Nkrumah aimed to establish a vanguard political party that would devote itself to the “education” and “consciousness” of the “mass” and root out political deviance. The “positive action” of this party would provide the African “mass” with a “comprehensive” ideology that could “light up every aspect of the life of our people,” creating “a strong continuing link with our past and . . . an assured bond with our future.”<sup>90</sup> The imposition of this ideology, Nkrumah admitted, insofar as it must aim to “unite the action of millions toward definite and specific goals,” is necessarily a form of “coercion,” but one ultimately in the interest of forging “cohesion” strong enough to produce unifying values and interests while holding the line against subversion.<sup>91</sup>

Although Nkrumah, a faithful student of African American nationalists, clearly interpreted the collective subject of his Pan-Africanism as including blacks in the Western Hemisphere and Europe, his emphasis on *diasporic* Pan-Africanism could not match Carmichael’s unbridled enthusiasm for building this transoceanic solidarity. As Kwame Ture, he insisted that people of African descent globally were “at bottom the same people” who “share history, culture, and common enemies” (RR, 675). This vision of a unified, global black peoplehood arrayed against a solidaristic, white supremacist-capitalist bloc is so axiomatic for Ture that those who attempt to acknowledge or conserve conventionally meaningful distinctions or differences (ethnicity, nationalism, ideology, etc.) were judged opprobriously as part of the “disunity, disorganization, and ideological confusion” that causes black suffering globally (RR, 675).

Confronting impossibly complex matrices of difference in his attempt to extend Nkrumah’s call for an All-Africa People’s Revolutionary Party (AAPRP) to the Diaspora, Ture was compelled to intensify the vanguard politics of ideological instruction to overcome it. Announcing “every Negro is a potential black man,” Ture reintroduced the Augustinian and masculinist rhetoric of conversion familiar to US black nationalist literature in the wake of the Nation of Islam.<sup>92</sup> Like many forms of nationalism, this imagined conversion was both backward- and forward-looking. In addition to locating the essential foundations of modern black identity in a mythic, “rediscovered” African past based on “communalism” and “human-

89 Kwame Nkrumah, *Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare: A Guide to the Armed Phase of the African Revolution* (New York: International, 1969), 8–9.

90 Nkrumah, *Consciencism*, 105.

91 Nkrumah, *Consciencism*, 60–61.

92 The ur-text of this genre is, of course, Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove, 1965).

ism,” Ture incessantly championed an explicitly ideological pedagogy, carried out by the vanguard party and institutions it founds (SS, 155–56). Given that the “first responsibility” of revolution was “to educate,” AAPRP, in Ture’s words, was “*organized* around political education,” and its fundamental organizational unit was the study group (RR, 677). “It is the job of the revolutionary intelligentsia,” he declared elsewhere, “to give [our people] the correct political ideology . . . a cohesive force, a set of principles, a set of beliefs that tell us where we’re going, what our goals are, and what we hope to achieve” (SS, 190–91).

In this turn from Black Power to Pan-Africanism, Ture had fallen victim to what Cedric Johnson has criticized as a “racial sentimentalism” less capable of ethical judgment or discerning the cross-cutting cleavages of class, gender, and philosophical pluralism among “black” people globally. Indeed, Johnson argues, the obsession with the study group and *ideological* education reflected a conflation of political thinking with technical expertise and the authority to participate. Leading ideologically self-assured black radicals far astray from the immediate concerns of their ostensible constituencies, this view of black politics enthroned an elitist picture of relevant political knowledge, all but ensuring that working people would always be subject to party-based guardianship.<sup>93</sup>

The politics of guardianship and the conception of political knowledge as technical expertise, thinly veiled beneath claims to speak on behalf of “the people” and “the masses,” lent themselves easily to apologetics on behalf of authoritarian rule in African states, as figures like Nkrumah and Touré took authoritarian turns shortly after gaining power. Nkrumah legalized “preventive detention” to punish political enemies, banned opposing political parties, and declared himself president-for-life before being overthrown in a 1966 coup.<sup>94</sup> Touré, who ruled Guinea for twenty-six years, was “despised” by critics “as a brutal and ruthless autocrat and tyrant who mercilessly threw thousands of Guineans in prison and systematically eliminated any Guinean intellectual or politician whom he perceived as a threat to his rule.”<sup>95</sup>

Kwame Ture was aware of criticism of his solidarity with authoritarian rulers, but he dismissed these attacks as confusing both the indigenous “self-discipline” of African peoples with “totalitarian” discipline imposed from above, and US and European covert disruption with organic oppositional movements (RR, 612–613). Moreover, in Carmichael’s Nkrumah-inspired “dialectical” thinking, authoritarian arrangements were to be judged by the criterion of “necessity”—what this historical stage of modernization, revolution, or education demands—rather than ultimately irrelevant “metaphysical” ethical criteria (SS, 162–63, 179, 212).

The nefarious efforts of US and European intelligence agencies must be taken

93 Johnson, *From Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, chap. 4.

94 David E. Apter, “Nkrumah, Charisma, and the Coup,” *Daedalus* 97, no. 3 (Summer 1968): 757–92.

95 Guy Martin, *African Political Thought* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 91.

seriously as one of the principal accelerating factors of African authoritarianism, and it remains a major failure of contemporary political theory that it rarely considers the ethics of resistance to security state or vigilante repression within social movements or among postcolonial nations.<sup>96</sup> While Ture's recognition of the threat of subversion is to be applauded, it is still clear that *some* degree of African authoritarianism can be traced to the ignoble tradition of disingenuous and ethically confused apologias in which he willingly participated. The impossible demands of his call for solidarity, and the implausible confidence with which he laid down the gauntlet between friend and enemy, led him to preemptively caricature many defenders of subaltern cosmopolitanisms or visions of alternative international arrangements beyond nation-state sovereignty and Pan-Africanist federation as petite bourgeois "betrayers of the people's struggle" akin to "deserters from the people's army."<sup>97</sup>

What Carmichael's trajectory raises, for the recent revival of interest in the dreams of Third World liberation and black internationalism, is a concern that democratic aspirations cannot be suitably reconciled with certain forms of politics *within* the "black radical tradition." Democracy arguably cannot survive or even emerge from attempts to place identitarian unity above solidarities of principle, impose uniformity on an imagined global collective subject, or treat even one's own imagined constituency as thoroughly dominated by ideological mystification, cultural alienation, or psychological self-hatred. The latter in particular lends force to the judgment that popular and practical participation in political authority should always be subject to comprehensive ideological suspicion or contingent on signs of a dramatic ethical-existential conversion. When the commitment to the nondomination of political peoples is globalized *and* made commensurate with the removal of these psychic, ideological, and cultural obstacles to authentic self-determination, it is easy to see how otherwise unthinkable forms of repression can be recast not only as preludes to genuine emancipation, but even as conditions for treating people as having the standing to interpret their own experiences or make claims on others. Beyond the familiar democratic or liberal arguments against Leninism, or the historical reconstruction of Carmichael's personal and psychological reasons for his fealty to Nkrumah and Touré, these remain concerns

96 A notable exception is Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), especially chap. 5.

97 Stokely Carmichael, "Lessons from the 60s (Speech at the University of Chicago, February 18, 1989)," accessed August 16, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcHlio\\_JLDM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcHlio_JLDM). The ideological success of nationalist and Pan-Africanist accounts of the postcolonial "problem-space" and the purportedly "realist" neoliberal response to their failure has been powerfully challenged by a wave of recent scholarship in political theory and anthropology, led by David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Négritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

relevant to contemporary students of political theory and African American intellectual history.

### Conclusion

Ture, who only returned to live in the US for medical treatment for the cancer that would take his life in 1998, has become a convenient symbol for these and other excesses of black radicalism, real or imagined. He makes a brief but important appearance in Barack Obama's autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, as a raving ideologue at a Columbia University forum, with eyes glowing like "a madman or a saint." His invocation there serves to mark Obama's judgment that "the movement had died . . . shattered into a thousand fragments," driving even those "with the best of intentions . . . further and further from the struggles of those they purported to serve . . . Or just plain crazy."<sup>98</sup> Such confident dismissals, however, lack a sense of the enduring import of Carmichael's distinctive contributions to political thought, features of which are still indispensable for analyzing the politics of race and economic inequality. Moreover, they miss the *historical* significance of the radical criticism, imagination, and organizing Carmichael helped occasion through the call for Black Power and the debates it inaugurated.<sup>99</sup>

At its best, Carmichael's corpus, and his autobiography especially, can be read as a rejoinder to the evasions of critics like the young author who would later become the first black president. Carmichael's most incisive work amounts to a powerful testament in defense of the proposition that while "it's possible to work honorably within the system," it is possible to do so only "in service to a serious movement outside . . . a radical alternative" (*RR*, 152). This mistake of thinking otherwise, for Carmichael, leads one to evade the fundamental questions of power and leverage, as well as the darker problem of what must be done when what ought to be done seems impossible, and betrayal, repression, exploitation, self-interest, and hypocrisy are ascendant if not entrenched.

For Carmichael, the radical alternatives our world most sorely needs are best limned by focusing intensely on the plight of the most disadvantaged Africans and African Americans to provoke a revolution in values (*RR*, 770). This approach to political thinking takes as its principal task the theorization of "new forms" of social and political power, ethical commitment, institutional leverage, cultural meaning, and even spatial arrangement by asking what cultural resources and theoretical insights a philosophy born of black struggles might provide.<sup>100</sup> In the

98 Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 139140.

99 Aziz Rana, "Decolonizing Obama," *n+1*, no. 27 (Winter 2017), available at <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-27/politics/decolonizing-obama/>.

100 Brian D. Goldstein, "'The Search for New Forms': Black Power and the Making of the Postmodern City," *Journal of American History* 103, no. 2 (September 2016): 375–99.

quest to build a “humane, rational, functional, just, decent, and civilized society,” however, these new forms must achieve more than the critique of racial ideology or the refinement of abstract democratic theory (*RR*, 781). “Liberation,” in Carmichael’s sense, also demands a vigilant political praxis capable of resisting the concrete tactics of power, structures of feeling, institutional norms, and habits by which the ignoble legacies of colonialism, slavery, and racism remain structuring features of our form of life.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>101</sup> For their thoughtful feedback on this paper, I am grateful to Melvin Rogers, Jack Turner, Cornel West, Adom Getachew, Peniel Joseph, Sam Klug, Joy Wang, and the graduate students in Yale’s Black Political Theory Reading Group.

## 27: Huey P. Newton and the Last Days of the Black Colony

Cedric G. Johnson

In August 1970, Roy Wilkins, the sexagenarian leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), used his syndicated column to criticize Huey Newton for urging the formation of an all-black fighting unit to assist the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. Newton cofounded the Black Panther Party for Self Defense with Bobby Seale in 1966 and had recently been released on a technicality after spending thirty-three months in prison for the killing of Oakland police officer John Frey. Wilkins saw black power militancy as cynical and misguided. “The Viet Cong may be hurting,” Wilkins wrote, “but nothing like the hurting of John Q. Black American. . . . Of course, Huey knows about this suffering. It was the resentment over this treatment that led, at least in part, to the founding of the Black Panthers. But Huey, for all his talents, is also a revolutionary. Revolutionaries get confused.”<sup>1</sup>

When he emerged from prison a month earlier, Newton addressed his supporters from atop the hood of a car, flanked by his longtime friend David Hilliard and Los Angeles Panther leader and fellow Louisiana native Elmer Geronimo Pratt. Wanting to bask in his newfound freedom, Newton took off his shirt revealing a taut frame, the reward of a punishing jailhouse regimen of push-ups. Young and defiant, he was the physical embodiment of the new militancy that contrasted sharply with Wilkins’s graying demeanor and bourgeois comportment. And yet, in contrast to the popular image of the fiery Black Power orator, Newton was charming but soft-spoken, and his public speeches were delivered in a nasal, breathless tone and a more deliberative manner than the soaring rhetoric of his contemporaries like Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael. In his response to Wilkins’s accusation of misplaced priorities, Newton defended the party’s domestic survival programs: free breakfast for schoolchildren, free health clinics and sickle-cell anemia screenings, free clothing and shoes, loans to welfare mothers, and bus trips for the families of prison inmates. Newton charged that Wilkins’s criticisms reflected his “obvious class interests and identification with the ruling circle” and belied his commitment to a reactionary internationalism, namely his support for

<sup>1</sup> “Reply to Roy Wilkins re: Vietnam, September 26, 1970,” in *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton*, ed. Toni Morrison (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009), 188–89.



Israel.<sup>2</sup> “Black People in America have long been affected in a negative way by America’s war of imperialism,” Newton wrote. “We are internationalists because our struggle must proceed on many fronts. While we feed and clothe the poor at home we must meet and attack the oppressor wherever he may be found.”<sup>3</sup>

Newton’s withering critique of Wilkins’s ideological capitulation and hypocrisy came at the height of the Panthers’ popularity. In a few short years the Black Panther Party had grown from a local organization created to confront police brutality on the streets of Oakland and Richmond, California, to the “vanguard of the black revolution” and in the eyes of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director and arch-anticommunist J. Edgar Hoover, the “greatest threat to the internal security of the country.”<sup>4</sup> If the Black Panther Party was the most iconic organization of the Black Power era, Newton was easily its most popular, recognizable figure. The early propaganda photo of Newton seated on a wicker throne with a carbine rifle

2 “Reply to Roy Wilkins,” 190.

3 “Reply to Roy Wilkins,” 192.

4 Hoover’s words have been recalled with increased frequency in recent years as citizens struggling against police violence have looked to the Panthers for inspiration. Such recollections have often been selective, and consequently the fuller meaning of Hoover’s words have been lost. One popular take I’ve heard recited by students and activists in recent years is that Hoover repressed the Panthers because of their service to the people. This is a mischaracterization, one that has no doubt been popularized by the 2011 documentary film *The Black Power Mixtape, 1967–1975*, where that quote is featured prominently. This interpretation has also gained traction within the post–Occupy Wall Street context of popular anarcho-liberal sentiments, which prefer building grassroots solutions to social problems—urban gardening, community land trusts, worker cooperatives, etc.—to directly contesting capitalist power or pursuing statist solutions. For the sake of clarification, Hoover’s original quote is worth revisiting: “The Breakfast for Children Program (BCP) has been instituted by the BPP in several cities to provide a stable breakfast for ghetto children. . . . The program has met with some success and has resulted in considerable favorable publicity for the BPP. . . . The resulting publicity tends to portray the BPP in a favorable light and clouds the violent nature of the group and its ultimate aim of insurrection. The BCP promotes at least tacit support for the BPP among naive individuals . . . and, what is more distressing, provides the BPP with a ready audience composed of highly impressionable youths. . . . Consequently, the BCP represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities . . . to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for” (FBI airtel from director to SACs [special agents in charge] in twenty-seven field offices, May 15, 1969).

What becomes clear is that the problem for Hoover was not the fact of black autonomy as such, given that he was not targeting the various black churches during the same period who provide hot meals, used clothing and other services to the poor as part of their ministry. His opposition to the Panthers was, at its root, ideological. The core problem for him centered on how the Free Breakfast program served as a means of building support for the Panthers among the broader black ghetto population, support for “the ultimate aim of insurrection.” The propagandistic dimension of the survival programs was dangerous, according to Hoover, because the Panthers embraced various communist and leftist governments in other parts of the world (China, Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria, etc.) that were enemies of the US during the Cold War. This broader context of “domino theory”—the fear of communism spreading from one country to the next (falling like dominoes)—and the containment strategy undertaken by the US state falls out of frame in so many more recent uses of that quote.

in one hand and a spear in the other captured the spirit of the age and continues to haunt popular memory and lore of the 1960s, decades after he was gunned down at only forty-seven years of age during a drug dispute in 1989. Like the broader movement he gave birth to, Newton's life was at various turns inspirational and tragic. Following his release, Newton struggled to integrate back into party life. The international campaign to win his freedom had made Newton a powerful symbol of the organization, but in many ways the party had outgrown his command, and others vied for influence beyond the Bay Area. The combined weight of heightened police repression and his own paranoia fueled Newton's addiction and reprehensible behavior. His rhetoric and political courage inspired thousands to stand against war, racism, and imperialism, and yet at other moments he succumbed to personal acts of brutality and self-destruction.

This chapter examines the political thought of the Black Panther Party's minister of defense and chief theoretician, and charts the evolution of Newton's anti-imperialist politics, assessing how he understood American empire and the social forces and political strategies that might contest ruling-class power. Although Newton would eventually matriculate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, obtaining a doctorate from the History of Consciousness program in June 1980, this chapter will focus on his earlier, popular left intellectual writings. I offer some discussion of Newton's political formation amid the new nationalist militancy of the early 1960s, but the primary period examined here is a very brief historical window, a mere six years, from the establishment of the party in 1966 to Newton's pronouncement in 1972 that the party was "putting down the gun" and finding ways to work within the American system. This time frame also corresponds to the birth of "Black Power" as a political slogan and the consolidation of radical and moderate forces around black ethnic politics at the 1972 National Black Political Convention held in Gary, Indiana. The year 1972 also marked a critical turning point in the Cold War, with Nixon embarking on a diplomatic visit to Mao Zedong's China, beginning the process of normalization between the two nations, and foreshadowing the turn to liberal economic reform under Deng Xiaoping. The historical period examined here was, to paraphrase Vladimir Lenin, a time when decades of political struggle were waged within the space of weeks.

I focus on this particular period because it is the one most readily celebrated by historians of black radicalism who venerate the Panthers' left internationalist politics.<sup>5</sup> Few of these contemporary works fully interrogate the meanings

5 Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002); Robin Kelley and Betsy Esh, "Black like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution," *SOULS*, Fall 1999, 6–41; Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Ahmed Shawki, *Black Liberation and Socialism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006); Rod Bush, *We Are Not What We*

and contradictions of this episode of twentieth-century black radical thinking. The generic posture is one of vindication and deference. There is a willingness to openly criticize liberal bourgeois politics of black elites, the misogyny and sexism of black radicals, as well as the essentialist and escapist elements of black cultural nationalism, but the left internationalism of the Panthers and other tendencies is typically spared from critique. This interpretive bias stems in part from the political sympathies of some left-leaning historians who wish to dispel conservative treatments of the 1960s and to create a genealogy of their own political views, which find consonance in the anti-imperialist and antiracist commitments of revolutionary black nationalists.

Newton and the Panthers deserve to be studied and debated because so much of their analysis and political practice addressed ghettoization, racist policing and incarceration, mass unemployment, and failing schools, problems that defined the urban crisis of the 1960s that have grown more intense and grave in our own times. Like Nikhil Singh, Joshua Bloom, Waldo E. Martin Jr., and others, I am sympathetic to the historical project of left internationalism the Panthers embodied, but rather than treat this political tendency as pristine and heroic, I want to offer a critical analysis of some of the central ideas offered by Newton that were at times widely shared among Black Power radicals and continue to shape left approaches to US inequality.

Newton's political ideas evolved from a formative nationalist period, where he and other black radicals embraced concepts from Third World decolonization struggles, to a more speculative left period after his 1970 release from prison, when he offered more original approaches to thinking about American empire and potential paths to socialism. Whereas the formative period grew out of his experiences in Oakland's black ghetto and were organized around the pursuit of black national liberation through armed self-defense and serving the people, the latter period was shaped by the expanded platform Newton gained as a celebrated political prisoner and focused increasingly on a notion of socialist revolution predicated on popular control of the forces of production. These transformations in his thinking were also undoubtedly influenced by the process of black political incorporation that was unfolding across the nation, a process that challenged the notion of organic black political community at the heart of black power rhetoric and practice. The concomitant expansion of the black professional-managerial class and hypersegregation of the black urban poor would spell the end of the black colony as a geographic reality and as a central thematic of black political discourse.

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Seem: *Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Nikhil Pal Singh, "The Black Panthers and the 'Undeveloped Country' of the Left," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1998); James Taylor, *Black Nationalism in the United States: From Malcolm X to Barack Obama* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2011); Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006); Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York: New York University, 2011).

This chapter explores Newton's evolving anti-imperialist politics, beginning with his use of the colonial analogy as a way to describe the social contradictions of black life in the 1960s. Given its centrality within Newton's writing and rhetoric, the black colony serves as the central interpretive thread here, a means for connecting broader anti-imperialist themes in his corpus. In their rhetoric and public personae, Newton and the Panthers helped to popularize the view that blacks were America's "wretched of the earth," a manifestation of the Third World in the heart of the world's most powerful capitalist nation. The colonial analogy was powerful as a means of connecting both the second-class citizenship endured by blacks and the grim human toll and social contradictions produced by American commercial and military power abroad, made so visible by counterinsurgencies and coups d'état around the globe, from the Congo and Indonesia to Cuba and Vietnam, actions orchestrated by the US Central Intelligence Agency to undermine left populist movements and destabilize socialist regimes.

This chapter begins by framing Newton's political origins within the context of the urban crisis and examines how the impersonal social and economic forces that defined post-World War II Oakland shaped Newton's intellectual development and political awakening. I explore his engagement with the new nationalist militancy that prefigured the rise of Black Power. It was this early activism that exposed Newton to the colonial analogy. The next section offers a critique of Newton's class analysis, in particular the party's valorization of the lumpenproletariat, a concept gleaned from the anti-imperialist writings of Mao Zedong and Frantz Fanon. Newton and other Panthers' assertion that the lumpenproletariat constituted a new vanguard confronted the intense social alienation of the urban unemployed. As Newton discovered, however, such attempts to transpose modes of thinking born in the colonized world onto the advanced industrial context of the US could not pinpoint the specific political and economic manifestations of empire that Americans faced on the domestic front, nor deliver an analysis that might have united black and white, suburban and urban, unionized and nonunionized, waged and unemployed into a counterpower capable of transforming American society. The third section examines Newton's evolving analysis of American empire, especially his views on the political implications of technology and his embrace of intercommunalism, a concept that grew out of his critique of nationalism and the new imperial geography. Newton came to terms with the limitations of the colonial analogy and offered precious insights regarding the unique problems facing Americans who would oppose empire from within, but he reached these fresh conclusions just as the social struggles of the 1960s were entering a phase of demobilization.

### **The Black Colony**

Newton, Seale, and many of the California Panthers were children of the westward migration of blacks from the Deep South during the industrial mobiliza-

tion of the Second World War. In 1942 Huey Percy Newton was born in Monroe, Louisiana, the youngest of Walter and Armelia Newton's seven children. Walter Newton was a Baptist preacher, sharecropper, and, at one time or another, worker in the local sawmills and sugarcane mills. He named his son after Louisiana's left populist governor, Huey Pierce Long, who had been gunned down in a hallway of the state capitol just seven years before the youngest of the Newton clan was born. When Long became governor in 1928, there had been only two bridges spanning the Mississippi River in the entire state. He embarked on an extensive project of modernization of the state's infrastructure and highways, and a social-democratic agenda that included free textbooks for all schoolchildren and a system of charity hospitals to serve the poor. Long's "Share Our Wealth" program, his response to the Great Depression, inspired workers like the elder Newton but drew suspicion from his political rivals within the Democratic Party and the ire of the state's merchant-planter and industrial capitalist classes.<sup>6</sup> Like his namesake, the young Huey Newton would embrace a deep ethical commitment to working-class people.

The reconfiguration of American capitalism that began during the Depression years would propel the Newtons westward and create the social conditions that shaped Huey Newton's political thinking and social ideals. Through the policies of the New Deal and the wartime mobilization that followed, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration would orchestrate the development of a new Keynesian state-market order defined by greater regulation of financial markets and an expanded social wage, labor protections and profit-sharing arrangements that gave birth to a consumer republic, and the norms and expectations of American middle-class life as we have come to know them.<sup>7</sup> Black life was radically transformed through these midcentury reforms as well, but Newton would come of age in a world still circumscribed by the color line.

In 1942 the Newtons joined the wartime caravan of southern migrants flooding the East Bay in search of work in the region's shipyards, military bases, and docks.<sup>8</sup> During the Second World War, shipwright Henry Kaiser purposely tar-

6 Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982); Huey P. Long, *Every Man a King: The Autobiography of Huey P. Long* (New York: Da Capo, 1996).

7 Rhonda F. Levine, *Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital and the State* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988); Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); Meg Jacobs, "'Democracy's Third Estate': New Deal Politics and the Construction of a 'Consuming Public,'" *International Labor and Working Class History* 55 (1999): 27-51; Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

8 Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Chris Rhomberg, *No There There: Race, Class and Political Community in Oakland* (Berkeley: University

geted the most Depression-ravaged states in the country, recruiting thousands of black and white workers from Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, and Mississippi to staff the massive assembly lines of his shipbuilding complex in Richmond, California. Black southern migrants were integrated into a segmented labor market in the Bay Area and elsewhere, occupying lower-skilled and low-wage jobs, and they were among the first to feel the jolts of peacetime demobilization and changes in industrial technology that continued apace in some sectors during the 1950s. By 1959 some 25 percent of Oakland's population lived below the poverty line, with 10 percent earning less than \$2,000 annually.<sup>9</sup> Oakland, Richmond, and East Palo Alto also saw population loss and economic divestment due to suburbanization during the postwar period. As Newton later recalled in his autobiography, Oakland was subdivided into two worlds where radically different class realities seemed to be sculpted into the local topography. The hills and the affluent area known as Piedmont were the exclusive enclaves of the white middle classes and the wealthy. "The other Oakland—the flatlands," Newton wrote, "consists of substandard income families that make up about 50 per cent of the population of nearly 450,000. They live in either rundown, crowded West Oakland or dilapidated East Oakland, hemmed in block after block, in ancient, decaying structures, now cut up into multiple dwellings."<sup>10</sup> "The landscape of East and West Oakland is depressing," he continued; "it resembles a crumbling ghost town, but a ghost town with inhabitants, among them more than 200,000 Blacks, nearly half the city's population. There is a dreary, grey monotony about Oakland's flatlands. . . . Oakland is a ghost town in the sense that many American cities are. Its white middle class has fled to the hills, and their indifference to the plight of the city's poor is everywhere evident."<sup>11</sup>

In school Newton struggled with disciplinary problems, reading, and his teachers'

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of California Press, 2004); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

9 Murch, *Living for the City*, 37.

10 Huey P. Newton with J. Herman Blake, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 13.

11 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 13–14. Newton's detailed depiction of the daily life of the black poor migrant communities of Oakland is vivid and painful. He recalled the humble diet of Cush (sometimes called "couche-couche" in rural southern Louisiana): "Unlike many others I knew, we never went hungry, although our food was the food of the poor. Cush was standard fare. Cush was made out of day-old corn bread mixed with other leftovers, such as gravy and onions, spiced very heavily and fried in a skillet. Sometimes we ate cush twice a day, because that was all we had. It was one of my favorite dishes, and I looked forward to it. Now I see that cush was not very nutritious and was downright bad for you if you ate it often; it is just bread—corn bread."

Newton described how he and the neighborhood kids tortured and killed rats and cats. "Dirt was a favorite toy," he added. "We used it to play at being builders. The roof of the house was our building site. We would climb up there and pull up the dirt filled buckets behind us with a rope, hand over hand, to the top of the house, and then dump the dirt down on the other side. There were no swimming pools near us, but when we got a little older we began to wander down to the bay with the other kinds and go swimming off the pier in the dirty water. Dirt, rats, cats: these are the games and toys of the poor, as old and cruel as economic reality."

racist low expectations, and when he graduated from high school he was functionally illiterate. With the help of his older brother Melvin, he taught himself to read. Newton began with his brother's copy of Plato's *Republic* and purchased a dictionary to assist his efforts. His path to literacy and intellectual life was similar to Malcolm X's, a combination of crude methods, self-discipline, the solitude of the prison cell, and ultimately the camaraderie and lively debates of the various political study groups he encountered after enrolling at Oakland City College (later renamed Merritt College) in 1959. It was there he met Bobby Seale, and the two became active in the Afro-American Association, an organization formed by Donald Warden. Through Warden's group, the pair read voraciously and sharpened their analysis of American history and culture, poring over W. E. B. Du Bois's Progressive-era essay collection *The Souls of Black Folk* and Ralph Ellison's critically acclaimed postwar novel *Invisible Man*, as well as Booker T. Washington's autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, and James Baldwin's paired essays on racism and religion, *The Fire Next Time*. And although Newton and Seale would eventually leave because they were dissatisfied with the group's "armchair intellectualizing" and lack of practical action, the Afro-American Association and other East Bay Area black organizations such as the Revolutionary Action Movement provided the two young activists with an education in ideas emerging from the new nationalist movement of the early 1960s.

The "new nationalism," or "new Afro-American nationalism" as it was called in some period publications, offered a searing critique of the civil rights movement that captivated the young Newton.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the southern movement with its Christian ethic of conciliation and agape love and its focus on attainment of formal citizenship rights, the new nationalism was defined by its emphasis on economic self-determination, a sharp criticism of the civil rights establishment, and rhetorical posturing toward revolutionary violence. Most advocates were skeptical that Jim Crow segregation could be defeated. They saw racism as foundational to American society, and the weekly incidences of police and mob violence against blacks, the mass arrests endured by peaceful demonstrators, and the extent of official inaction and complicity only steeled the new nationalists' cynicism regarding the prospects of an integrated society. Some like Nation of Islam minister Malcolm X advocated armed self-defense against segregationist attacks, and in a few places, groups like the Deacons for Defense and Justice in the border towns of Louisiana and Mississippi, and NAACP leader Robert F. Williams in Monroe, North Carolina, actually took up arms and engaged in skirmishes with Klansmen and others who threatened black lives.<sup>13</sup> With the exception of these

12 Harold Cruse, "Negro Nationalism's New Wave," in *Rebellion or Revolution?* (New York: William Morrow, 1968); John Henrik Clarke, "The New Afro-American Nationalism," *Freedomways*, 1961, 285-95.

13 Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (1962; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

southern efforts, however, the new nationalism's adherents were mostly urban and northern based. A unifying ideological thread among the new nationalists was their insistence that blacks were in fact a colony residing within the confines of the United States. This argument constituted a sharp reprisal of Cold War liberal characterizations of racial inequality as a sectional conflict, rooted in folkways and customs that contradicted the nation's cherished democratic ideals, and the act of naming blacks a colony was a defiant expression of solidarity with national liberation struggles throughout the colonized world.

The colonial analogy, the view that blacks constituted a semicolonial, oppressed nation within the mainland United States, can be traced back through the thought of various black nationalist and radical Left figures. During the antebellum period, emigrationist and physician Martin Delany talked about blacks as a "nation within a nation," and during the New Negro era of the 1920s, black nationalists such as Marcus Garvey built a mass movement that aspired to create black political and economic autonomy that would rival the imperial powers of Europe.<sup>14</sup> As well, the Communist Party adopted "Self-Determination for the Black Belt South" as an official line at the 1928 Sixth Congress of the Communist International, with Nebraska-born black radical intellectual Harry Haywood emerging as the foremost American advocate for this position, which saw blacks as an oppressed nationality who deserved the right to self-governance and land. The ex-communist and essayist Harold Cruse, however, is the most immediate author of the colonial analogy in the early 1960s. His 1962 essay "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American" was published in the journal *Studies on the Left* and quickly became required reading among the new nationalists, including the Afro-American Association and Revolutionary Action Movement circles frequented by Newton and Seale.

Cruse opens the essay by assailing the failures of Western Marxists—his euphemism for the US Communist Party leadership—charging that they had not to come to terms with the growing conservatism of white industrial workers, nor did they fully appreciate the implications of the emergence of colonized nations as a revolutionary force. He viewed the emergence of the Cuban Revolution and the inability of orthodox Marxists to foresee it as symptomatic of their intellectual myopia. They expected the proletariat in the advanced capitalist nations to lead the struggle for socialism, but Cruse claimed the colonized world had taken the lead. "The revolutionary initiative has passed to the colonial world," he argued, "and in the United States is passing to the Negro," whose relation to the dominant culture is comparable to that of colonial subjects.<sup>15</sup> For Cruse, the Negro is "the

14 Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1978); Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1991); Dean Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001).

15 Cruse, "Revolutionary Nationalism," 75; see also Jack O'Dell, "Colonialism and the Negro American Experience," *Freedomways* 6, no. 4 (Fall 1966): 296–308; and Jack O'Dell, "A Special Variety of Colonialism," *Freedomways* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 7–15.



American problem of underdevelopment” and the “failure of American Marxists to understand the bond between the Negro and the colonial peoples of the world has led to their failure to develop theories that would be of value to Negroes in the United States.”<sup>16</sup> Although Cruse tends to overstate the bankruptcy of organized labor and white workers here and elsewhere in his writings—in the twenty years after 1947, strikes were ten times more prevalent than they would be after 1980—his comments point to legitimate political problems created by the institutionalization of capital-labor conflicts under New Deal social democracy.<sup>17</sup> “If the white working class is ever to move in the direction of demanding structural changes in society,” Cruse held, “it will be the Negro who will furnish the initial force.”<sup>18</sup>

In describing the Negro’s colonial status, Cruse minimized the matter of labor exploitation, which along with the extraction of mineral wealth and other natural resources is in fact the driving impetus of most colonial projects. Focusing on the matter of exploitation would have required Cruse to discuss class position in discrete historical terms, with the shared dependency and exploitation of black and white workers, whether waged or unwaged, enslaved or free, potentially undermining his black nationalist posture. Taking up the latter dynamics of primary accumulation would have meant examining colonization in a more sustained hemispheric, if not global, perspective—again, a position that would have contradicted Cruse’s insistence on the particular predicament and common political interests of US blacks. Instead of taking up these troublesome matters, he emphasized the social effects of proletarianization, secondary forms of exploitation, and the putative psychological and cultural dimensions of black oppression in the US. “Like the peoples of the underdeveloped countries,” Cruse wrote, “the Negro suffers in varying degrees from hunger, illiteracy, disease, ties to the land, urban and semi-urban slums, cultural starvation, and the psychological reactions to being ruled over by others not of his kind.”<sup>19</sup> Cruse’s analysis elides the salience of class among African Americans: “As a wage laborer or tenant farmer, the Negro is discriminated against and exploited. Those in the educated, professional, and intellectual classes suffer a similar fate.”<sup>20</sup> The view that blacks constituted a semicolonial people within the domestic borders of the United States arose as an alternative to Cold War liberal accounts of racial inequality, and not only was a central component of Panther ideology early on but was widely embraced among Black Power radicals and activists throughout the New Left.

Newton’s formative two-part essay “In Defense of Self-Defense” offers some

16 Cruse, “Revolutionary Nationalism,” 74–75.

17 Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 99.

18 Cruse, “Revolutionary Nationalism,” 96.

19 Cruse, “Revolutionary Nationalism,” 75–76; Cedric Johnson, “Between Revolution and the Racial Ghetto: Harold Cruse and Harry Haywood Debate Class Struggle and the ‘Negro Question,’ 1962–8,” *Historical Materialism* 24, no. 2 (2016): 165–203.

20 Cruse, “Revolutionary Nationalism,” 76.

exposition of the colonial analogy. "It is our belief," Newton wrote, "that the Black People in America are the only people who can free the world, loosen the yoke of colonialism, and destroy the war machine. Black people who are within the machine can cause it to malfunction. They can, because of their intimacy with the mechanism, destroy the engine enslaving the world. America will not be able to fight every Black country in the world and fight a civil war at the same time."<sup>21</sup> Here is where the revolutionary rhetoric of the Panthers, and Black Power radicals more generally, runs aground. Despite the critical posture toward black political elites throughout the period, black left politics was hampered by a dominant ideological commitment to race unity and notions of political allegiance that are grounded in identity. In other words, whether we are talking about black cultural nationalism, revolutionary nationalism, or even some manifestations of black socialist politics, all tended to abide prevailing assumptions regarding ethnic group affinity and politics. Actual material and ideological differences were either not fully acknowledged or viewed as inconsequential; most often these cleavages were seen as externally driven, incidental, and capable of being surmounted through political unity. In this formative essay by Newton, we get a clear sense of his optimism concerning the epistemic and political unity of the black colony. He argued, "Black people must now move, from the grass roots up through the perfumed circles of the Black bourgeoisie, to seize by any means necessary a proportionate share of the power vested and collected in the structure of America."<sup>22</sup> Newton's views of the black professional-managerial class, however, would evolve from a form of cultural criticism, which derided the bourgeois lifestyles and political shortcomings of black leadership, toward a more nuanced view of class, more firmly grounded in a critique of the capitalist political economy.

During the 1960s, African Americans confronted American empire not as colonial subjects but as citizens who were historically disenfranchised under Jim Crow and were undergoing a belated and incomplete process of incorporation into the consumer society, what some termed at the time the "Second Reconstruction." The black population was composed primarily of the most submerged and dispossessed segment of workers but also by a stratum of professionals, merchants, and public employees. Although the colonial analogy provided a broad language that united black nationalists and different radical left tendencies during the 1960s, their political approaches were not uniform, with some like Cruse calling for what amounted to a form of black ethnic politics that was in practice closer in content and aspirations to the urban machine politics pursued by various white ethnic groups than to the national liberation movements of the Third World.<sup>23</sup>

21 Newton, "In Defense of Self-Defense, I," in *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, ed. David Hilliard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories, 2002), 135.

22 Newton, "In Defense of Self-Defense, I," 136.

23 Robinson, *Black Nationalism*, 88–117; Adolph Reed Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Postsegregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

Whereas Cruse would emphasize the leadership role of the ghetto bourgeoisie, and later that of creative intellectuals, in advancing the interests of the black colony, Newton and the Panthers would side with a different, most maligned social force, the so-called lumpenproletariat. Newton and Seale, in fact, decided to found the Black Panther Party because they felt that other black nationalist organizations were not firmly committed to organizing “brothers on the block” but were instead “too content to sit around and analyze without acting.”<sup>24</sup> Newton and Seale saw the black communities of the East Bay as occupied territory where inhabitants were routinely subjected to police surveillance, intimidation, and violence. Drawing inspiration from the community patrols that were organized in Watts after the 1965 rebellion and the armed self-defense tactics of Robert F. Williams in North Carolina, Newton and Seale took to the streets with sidearms and law books to monitor police activity in Oakland. Their allegiances were to the black laboring classes. “As I saw so many of my friends on their way to becoming dropouts from the human family, I wanted to see something good happen to them,” Newton recalled. “They were getting married and beginning to have babies. Ahead of them were the rounds of jobs and bills my father had gone through.” Newton summarized the dire economic predicament so many experienced in the black ghetto as “like being on an urban plantation, a kind of modern-day sharecropping.” For the young Newton not much had changed since the debt peonage his parents had endured in North Louisiana. On the plantation, he wrote, “you worked hard, brought in your crop, and you were always in debt to the landholder.” “The Oakland brothers worked hard and brought in a salary,” Newton continued, “but they were still in perpetual debt to the stores that provided them with the necessities of life. . . . It was agonizing to watch the brothers move down those dead end streets.”<sup>25</sup> Newton and the Panthers drew on elements of Marxism to make sense of Cold War class relations and to understand the social predicament of those who were largely excluded from the consumer middle class and under threat of technological obsolescence.

### **The Lumpenproletariat as Vanguard?**

The lumpenproletariat, those whom Newton deemed America’s “wretched of the earth,” occupies a curious place within the Marxist tradition but is elevated to a vanguard political role within Newton’s rhetoric. The notion of the lumpenproletariat, roughly translated as the “proletariat in rags,” appears in the early polemical writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Assaying the class forces in motion around them and the potential political role of the “dangerous class,” Marx and Engels, in the *Communist Manifesto*, held that “the social scum, that passively rot-

24 Huey P. Newton, “Black Capitalism Re-analyzed I,” in *To Die for the People*, 99.

25 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 74.

ting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far better for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.”<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere Engels described the lumpenproletariat in even harsher terms as “the worst of all possible allies,” “absolutely venal and absolutely brazen,” and he concluded that “every leader of the workers who uses these scoundrels as guards or relies on them for support proves himself by this action alone a traitor to the movement.”<sup>27</sup> Mao Zedong and Frantz Fanon were more immediate influences on Newton’s use of the concept.

Unlike the early Marx and Engels, who saw the lumpenproletariat as essentially reactionary, Mao and Fanon saw this segment of the working class as a potentially revolutionary force. Speaking of China’s growing dispossessed population, comprising landless peasants and redundant craftsmen, Mao concluded, “They lead the most precarious existence of all.”<sup>28</sup> He continued: “China’s status as a colony and semi-colony has given rise to a multitude of rural and urban unemployed. Denied proper means of making a living, many of them are forced to resort to illegitimate ones, hence the robbers, gangsters, beggars and prostitutes and the numerous people who live on superstitious practices.” While he harbored some of Marx and Engel’s fears about the reactionary tendencies of the subproletariat, Mao was more optimistic: “One of China’s difficult problems is how to handle these people, Brave fighters but apt to be destructive, they can become a revolutionary force if given proper guidance.”<sup>29</sup> Rather than moral condemnation, the problem of the lumpen required political strategy. “This social stratum is unstable,” Mao continued: “while some are apt to be bought over by the reactionary forces, others may join the revolution. These people lack constructive qualities and are given to destruction rather than construction; after joining the revolution, they become a source of roving-rebel and anarchist ideology in the revolutionary ranks. Therefore, we should know how to remould them and guard against their destructiveness.”<sup>30</sup>

Fanon approached the lumpen in a similar manner. Fanon, the Martinique-born psychiatrist and Algerian revolutionary whose writings struck a chord with so many American black radicals during the 1960s, saw the subproletariat of African cities as vital to any struggle for national liberation. The colonies did not possess the same large industrial working class as the mother country; therefore,

26 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Verso, 1998), 48.

27 Friedrich Engels, prefatory note to “The Peasant War in Germany,” in *Marx and Engels: Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1958), 1:646.

28 Mao Zedong, “The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party,” in *The Collected Writings of Chairman Mao*, vol. 1, *Politics and Tactics* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2009), 141.

29 Mao Zedong, “Analysis of the Classes of Chinese Society,” in *Selected Works* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), 1:19.

30 Mao, “Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party,” 141.

for Fanon, other social forces would figure more prominently in the anticolonial revolutionary process. "It is within this mass of humanity, this people of the shanty towns, at the core of the lumpenproletariat, that the rebellion will find its urban spearhead," Fanon wrote. "That horde of starving men, uprooted from their tribe and from their clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people."<sup>31</sup> Like "a horde of rats," Fanon observed, "you may kick them and throw stones at them, but despite your efforts they'll go on gnawing at the roots of the tree."<sup>32</sup> Following Mao and Fanon, Newton wrote about the growing ranks of the urban unemployed with great sympathy and compassion.

Newton's affinity for the lumpenproletariat was, at its root, personal. It is clear from his own autobiography that Newton had traveled the same mean streets as the poorest masses, sharing their hardships. He was spurned in school. He committed petty crimes such as robbing parking meters, forging checks, and burglarizing homes. Even after he enrolled at Oakland City College, he passed time in pool halls, and in 1964 he was sentenced to six months in prison for stabbing Odell Lee with a steak knife at a party, an incident that Newton held was an act of self-defense. Reflecting on his dissatisfaction with the lack of programmatic action in campus groups like the Soul Students Advisory Council, RAM, and the Afro-American Association, Newton expressed his affinity for the most dispossessed:

The street brothers were important to me, and I could not turn away from the life I shared with them. There was in them an intransigent hostility toward all those sources of authority that had such a dehumanizing effect on the community . . . My comrades on the block continued to resist that authority, and I felt that I could not let college pull me away, no matter how attractive education was. These brothers had the sense of harmony and communion I need to maintain that part of myself not totally crushed by the schools and other authorities.<sup>33</sup>

Newton's embrace of the lumpen, however, would meld with prevailing Cold War culture of poverty notions. His short essay, "Fear and Doubt," first published on May 15, 1967, is revealing, and indicative of some of the broadly held assumptions about poverty that defined the Great Society mood. There is a tendency for latter-day historians to see black nationalism and Cold War liberalism as distant and largely conflicting ideological tendencies, but they converged at times around a shared rhetoric of social damage as way of explaining black oppression.<sup>34</sup>

31 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963), 129.

32 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 130.

33 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 74–75.

34 On the political uses of social damage imagery, see Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Despite their revolutionary ambitions, Newton's early writings do not escape the influence of Cold War liberal poverty discourse that emphasized the moral degradation of the poor as often as the impersonal structural forces that defined their predicament.<sup>35</sup> The "lower socio-economic Black male is a man of confusion," wrote Newton. "He faces a hostile environment and is not sure that it is not his own sins that have attracted the hostilities of society. All his life he has been taught (explicitly and implicitly) that he is an inferior approximation of humanity."<sup>36</sup> Denied quality education and routes to upward social mobility in a racist society, the black working classes and poor are haunted by a "two-headed monster," according to Newton. He points to two manifestations of self-blame that afflict the black man, the belief that "he lacks the innate ability to cope with the socio-economic problems confronting him" and the attitude that "he has the ability, but simply has not felt strongly enough to try to acquire the skills needed to manipulate his environment."<sup>37</sup> Newton then wades into what is now familiar territory when speaking of the chronically unemployed when he asserts that the black man, in his fight against invisibility, "attempts to make himself visible by processing his hair, acquiring a 'boss mop,' or driving a long car even though he cannot afford it. He may father several 'illegitimate children by several different women in order to display his masculinity. But in the end, he realizes that his efforts have no real effect."<sup>38</sup> Society still views him as "a thing, a beast, a nonentity, something to be ignored or stepped on." Newton concludes in a manner that rehearses themes of black emasculation, echoing the 1965 Moynihan Report on the Black Family, which concluded that the matriarchal black family, a vestige of slave culture, produced individuals who were socially maladjusted, prone to pathological behavior, and unassimilable within bourgeois society. In a similar vein, Newton wrote: "In a society where a man is valued according to occupation and material possessions [the black man] is unskilled and more often than not, either marginally employed or unemployed. Often his wife (who is able to secure a job as a maid, cleaning for white people) is the breadwinner. He is therefore, viewed as quite worthless by his wife and children. He is ineffectual both in and out of the home. He cannot provide for, or protect his family. He is invisible, a nonentity. Society will not acknowledge him as a man."

Newton embraced certain elements of liberal poverty discourse in his formative writing on black oppression, but his views, unlike those of latter-day underclass theorists, situated these putative behavioral problems within a broader

35 Touré F. Reed, "Why Moynihan Was Not So Misunderstood at the Time: The Mythological Prescience of the Moynihan Report and the Problem of Institutional Structuralism," *Nonsite*, no. 17, September 4, 2015, <http://nonsite.org/article/why-moynihan-was-not-so-misunderstood-at-the-time>.

36 Huey P. Newton, "Fear and Doubt," in *Huey P. Newton Reader*, F131.

37 Newton, "Fear and Doubt," 131–32.

38 Newton, "Fear and Doubt," 132.

moral condemnation of capitalism. We glimpse a more discerning perspective on these matters in Newton's 1970 essay "Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?" published shortly before his acquittal and release in the case of Frey's killing. Here Newton contends that there are two types of prisoners, the "illegitimate capitalist" and the political prisoner.

In this account, the behaviors that are condemned by liberals and conservatives as some unique pathology of the urban poor are reframed by Newton as survival crimes, acts of economic self-interest no different from the consumer aspirations of the American middle class. The illegitimate capitalists "wish to acquire the same goals as everybody else: money, power, and conspicuous consumption. . . . Their aim is to acquire everything this capitalistic society defines as legitimate."<sup>39</sup> The second type of prisoner, however, rejects capitalist society. Newton says of this type, the political prisoner: "He argues that the people at the bottom of society are exploited for the profit and advantage of those at the top. . . . The society is corrupt and illegitimate and must be overthrown."<sup>40</sup> For all his talk of the social degradation of the black urban poor, capitalism remained the central target of Newton's criticism, for it was this historical process that alienated humans from the products of their labor and from one another. "Although this system may make the society function at a high level of technological efficiency," Newton wrote, "it is an illegitimate system, since it rests upon the suffering of humans who are as worthy and as dignified as those who do not suffer."<sup>41</sup>

Newton and the Panthers saw the lumpenproletariat as potentially revolutionary, because unlike those more secure segments of the unionized working classes who could now afford homeownership and middle-class lifestyles, this most submerged stratum was banished to inner-city ghettos, failing schools, and a lifetime of chronic unemployment and poverty. Hence their material conditions made them ripe for rebellion. Newton approached the lumpenproletariat from a different historico-geographic context than Mao or Fanon, a Cold War American context defined by an expanding and suburbanizing middle class and national prosperity. Economic growth in many urban centers was stimulated by extensive federal investment in scientific research and technological development, and the mass production of military hardware and all manner of consumer goods. Within this context, sections of the proletariat had been politically co-opted, their organizations made conservative through anticommunist purges and the so-called labor-management accord, an advantageous relation for capital whereby workers traded substantive power over production for increased wages and benefits. Newton and others like fellow Panther Eldridge Cleaver increasingly saw the black subproletariat, and not the industrial working class, as the new vanguard, because the intense conflicts over desegregation and the black urban predicament had birthed more powerful political forces.

39 Newton, "Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?," in *Huey P. Newton Reader*, 155.

40 Newton, "Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?," 155–56.

41 Newton, "Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?," 156.

In his essay “On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party,” Cleaver emphasized the growing gap between the urban lumpen and the more affluent suburban working classes, and in a manner closer to Marx’s mature writings, he treats the lumpen as a segment of the industrial reserve army. The lumpenproletariat are, Cleaver wrote, “all those who have no secure relationship or vested interests in the means of production and the institutions of capitalist society. That part of the ‘Industrial Reserve Army’ held perpetually in reserve; who have never worked and never will; who can’t find a job; who are unskilled and unfit; who have been displaced by machines, automation and cybernation and were never ‘retained or invested with new skills’; all those on Welfare or receiving State Aid.”<sup>42</sup> Like Cruse, Cleaver and Newton concluded that the American working class—that is, the industrial wage-laboring class—had become too politically reactionary. “In both the Mother Country and the Black Colony,” Cleaver held, “the Working Class is the Right Wing of the Proletariat, and the Lumpenproletariat is the Left Wing.”<sup>43</sup> Why is this the case? “The Working Class of our time has become a new industrial elite,” Cleaver continues, “resembling more the chauvinistic elites of the selfish craft and trade guilds of Marx’s time than the toiling masses ground down in abject poverty.”<sup>44</sup> A new labor aristocracy now implicated in American imperialism, the working class of the postwar era, for Cleaver is “a parasite upon the heritage of mankind.”<sup>45</sup> Cleaver’s words captured a central contradiction of American life during the Cold War, but the Panthers’ view that the lumpen would become the vanguard was a flawed revolutionary politics, one that resonated powerfully with segments of the black urban working class but could not generate the kind of popular power necessary to contest capital.

As I see it, there are at least three problems worth noting with the valorization of the lumpenproletariat in Newton and other Panthers’ political theory. First, in terms of interpretation, they seized upon a moral-political category within the early corpus of Marx, namely the activist pamphlets and historical studies of the young Marx and Engels, and employed this concept sociologically in a very different historical context and in a manner that conflated more than it clarified about social life in the United States during the 1960s. Marx and Engels’s discussions of the “proletariat in rags” as a morally degraded and politically opportunistic brood appear in their historical interpretation of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte’s mobilization of reactionary forces to attain power. Marx and Engels’s discussion of the concept takes place amid steam-powered industrialization, and within this nascent process, the unemployed, newly arriving migrants from the hinterlands, and immigrants at various turns played the role of strikebreakers, provocateurs, and hired guns, weapons in the hands of capital against assertive and organized

42 Eldridge Cleaver, “On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party,” in *Target Zero: A Life in Writing*, ed. Kathleen Cleaver (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 177.

43 Cleaver, “On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party,” 177.

44 Cleaver, “On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party,” 177–78.

45 Cleaver, “On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party,” 177.



workers. In a similar manner, when Mao and Fanon take up this concept, they are speaking about industrializing or semi-industrial contexts where the dispossessed peasantry constituted a problem for those who wished to instigate a revolutionary socialist transition. Either these teeming, idle masses would be drawn into the ranks of surging revolutionary movements and newly established governments, or they might overwhelm the state either as dependent wards or as a counterrevolutionary force. There are vast differences in numerical proportions, economic origins, social power, and political consciousness of the “dangerous classes” that inhabited the factory towns of the nineteenth-century English midlands, the metropolises of China and Algeria after the Second World War, and the American urban ghettos that Newton, Cleaver, and others confronted in the late 1960s. The urban black unemployed and unemployables did not always pose a direct threat with respect to competition over waged jobs, but in the popular imagination they constituted a potential threat to the consumer lifestyles and property rights of the middle class, and in the emerging rhetoric of the New Right, the poor were cast as a tax burden on the self-governing middle class, who shouldered responsibility for the poor’s housing, health care, and basic needs through public assistance. As surplus population, the black urban poor were subjected to an even more powerful and elaborate police state apparatus and intensified spatial segregation in the wake of 1960s urban rebellions.

Rather than the notion of the lumpenproletariat, which functioned as an epithet for the young Marx but recedes in his mature writings, Newton’s class analysis might have been better served by the industrial reserve army, which Marx conceived as a facet of the broader process of proletarianization, the maintenance of a wage labor regime through the complementary dynamics of dispossession and exploitation. Marx contends that this “disposable reserve army . . . belongs to capital just as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost”; the reserve is a “mass of human material always ready for exploitation by capital in the interest of capital’s own changing valorization requirements.”<sup>46</sup> In volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx rarely mentions the lumpen, but when he does it is in a more sympathetic manner. The lumpen are seen as a segment of the reserve, as those who dwell in a sphere of pauperism, “the hospital of the active labour-army and the dead weight of the industrial reserve army.”<sup>47</sup> The poor and unemployed are merely ruined workers who share the same vulnerability and economic interests as those currently subjected to exploitation. Some latter-day theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Michael Denning have argued, and I think correctly, that the threat of wageless life is a fundamental feature of capital accumulation.<sup>48</sup> Rather than emphasize

46 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books / New Left Review, 1976), 1:784.

47 Marx, *Capital*, 1:797.

48 Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review* 66 (November–December 2010): 79–97; Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2010).

ing the most submerged, dispossessed stratum of the American population as socially dissimilar and politically isolated, the concept of the reserve army might have been reworked to capture the broader dynamics of high-technology capital and how unemployment and wage-labor exploitation are intertwined, possibly preparing the groundwork for meaningful class solidarity.

Second, Newton and others within the party found inspiration in anticolonial struggles, but they erred in thinking that the strategies that were effective in the Third World decolonization movements, particularly those that waged guerrilla warfare, were applicable to the context of America's advanced industrial society. In much Panther rhetoric and subsequent historiography of the organization, *armed self-defense*, the protection of black lives embodied in the party's early police-monitoring patrols, is often conflated with *armed struggle*, full-scale war to overthrow imperial power. Newton argued, "Only with the power of the gun can the Black masses halt the terror and brutality directed against them by the armed racist power structure; and in one sense only by the power of the gun can the whole world be transformed into the earthly paradise dreamed of by the people from time immemorial."<sup>49</sup> In the opening paragraph of his July 1967 essay "The Correct Handling of Revolution," Newton surveyed the recent urban rebellion in East Oakland and concluded that the black masses were "handling the resistance incorrectly." The primary role for the Black Panther Party, he argued, was to provide leadership for the people, "When the people learn that it is no longer advantageous for them to resist by going in the streets in large numbers, and when they see the advantage in activities of the guerilla warfare method, they will quickly follow this example."<sup>50</sup> At various points in this essay Newton makes reference to international examples of the "correct handling" of revolution, such as Fidel Castro in the Cuban Revolution, the Algerian Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and Kenya's anticolonial struggle, and by "correct handling" he was referring to those movements that successfully waged a revolutionary war effort.

The revolutions that Newton cites, however, evolved over time and within specific historical conditions: an advantageous balance of class forces, emergent political opportunities, local cultures, class consciousness, etc. And in most cases their methods, strategies, and uses of political violence achieved success only after these movements had secured popular legitimacy. The context the Panthers confronted was quite different. Despite the widespread popularity of their legal defense campaigns, no one could argue credibly that the Panthers ever garnered national-popular support for their vision of socialist revolution, and certainly not the level of mass support needed to the wage guerrilla war toward that political objective. Truth be told, American citizens, including African Americans, held more in common sociologically and politically with the events unfolding in Paris

49 Newton, "In Defense of Self-Defense, I," 137.

50 Huey P. Newton, "The Correct Handling of a Revolution," in *Huey P. Newton Reader*, 142.

during May 1968, with its factory takeovers, student strikes, and immigrant rights protests, than with the hot wars against imperialism in the jungles of Bolivia, Vietnam, and Mozambique.

Third, the valorization of the lumpenproletariat was both counterintuitive and ultimately politically divisive. The argument was predicated on an increasingly popular caricature of the American Left that was rooted partially in empirical reality but equally driven by a Cold War ideological project that sought to bury America's interwar history of class struggle. Popular film and television, and podium rhetoric, particularly among black nationalists, presented the American industrial working class as placated, bought off, and hostile to black progress, a depiction at odds with the actual history of the interwar communist popular front and progressive labor's support for the fight against Jim Crow segregation. Moreover, if the labor unions and socialist tendencies of the middle twentieth century could not carry out revolution on US soil, how might the most socially isolated and politically disempowered segment of the population succeed where more powerful forces had failed? Newton, Cleaver, and other defenders of the lumpenproletariat as the new vanguard were right in refocusing attention on the most dispossessed of America's inner-city ghettos. Their arguments, however, unwittingly reinscribed the prevailing Cold War liberal ideology that treated black urban poverty as a social anomaly within an otherwise sacrosanct liberal democratic capitalist order.

In a generally perceptive account of community action discourse after the Second World War, Alyosha Goldstein contends that the Black Panther Party offered a countermodel to the community empowerment strategies of the Great Society, and concludes that the "poor as the object of the War on Poverty and the lumpenproletariat as the foundational cadre for the Panthers were not equivalent."<sup>51</sup> Whether the unemployed actually constituted the core cadre of the Panthers is debatable. This was true of some well-known figures such as Newton and Cleaver who were drawn from the ranks of the criminalized black working class, but not for other cadre and supporters who were high school and college students, social workers, teachers, laborers, and so forth. Equally, the relationship between the War on Poverty and the Panthers, and Black Power radicalism more generally, was more complex than some historical accounts concede. Working with anti-poverty programs was part of the political socialization for many blacks during the late 1960s, including some Panther cadre. Seale ran an antipoverty program in North Oakland before founding the party with Newton. Also Bob Lee, a native Houstonian, migrated to Chicago under the auspices of Volunteers in Service to America before joining the Panthers and forming what would become the first "Rainbow Coalition" of radical left organizations, the Young Lords, Rising Up

<sup>51</sup> Alyosha Goldstein, *Poverty in Common: The Politics of Community Action during the American Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 214.

Angry, and the Young Patriots in Uptown, Chicago. Most importantly, Goldstein's counterposition of the Panthers with the War on Poverty may miss the symbiotic relationship between Black Power militancy and the managerial dynamics of Great Society statism. That is, although the focus on the lumpenproletariat carried an air of revolutionary ardor, the rhetorical and actual political threat posed by Black Power radicals helped to enhance the leverage of those more moderate leadership elements of the black ghetto, facilitating dynamics of integration and patronage that gave birth to a new black urban governing regime of politicians and policy bureaucrats.<sup>52</sup> Most often, those who evoked the specter of ever more destructive forces revealed in urban rebellions facilitated a process of elite brokerage and movement containment, a path that led to more representation and services rather than the abolition of the powerful economic forces that produced unemployment, exploitation, and segregation in US inner cities.

### Confronting American Empire

In this section I examine Newton's emerging critique of American empire during what I think was his most fruitful but sadly short-lived phase of intellectual activity, from his 1970 release from prison to 1972. This short historical window of two years constituted the height of Newton's political influence and popularity. The campaign to secure his release from prison had made Newton an internationally recognized figure. He traveled extensively, lecturing at colleges and universities, appearing on television and radio broadcasts, and holding court with revolutionary figures such as the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, FRELIMO commander and Mozambican president Samora Moisés Machel, and Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. During these years Newton's most famous books were completed, *To Die for the People* (1972), a collection of his writings edited by Toni Morrison, and his autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973). Newton would continue to write throughout the 1970s, but those later works, many of which were developed within the context of his graduate school education at Santa Cruz, were more narrowly focused and did not reach a wide audience. During this short period in which he enjoyed a broad reception and international notoriety,

52 Kent Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); Barbara Cruikshank, *Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power and the Making of American Politics, 1965–1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); See also Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Cedric Johnson, *From Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxv–xxvii; Reed, "Sources of Demobilization in the New Black Political Regime: Incorporation, Ideological Capitulation, and Radical Failure in the Post-segregation Era," in *Stirrings in the Jug*, 117–59.

we find Newton offering a more forceful analysis of US empire where he not only attempts a more full-bodied interpretation of technology and its emancipatory potential but also introduces the notion of *intercommunalism* as way of understanding the new social geography of empire. Much of this material is speculative, both in the most precious sense of being probing and critical and in the less satisfying sense of being incomplete. Newton's notion of revolutionary intercommunalism reads at times like a euphemism for socialism, an adjustment to the brutal policing of the party, and evidence of the arcane ideological detours of the New Communist moment. What follows is not an endorsement of intercommunalism but an exploration of how his thinking evolved away from a focus on national liberation rooted in Third Worldism toward a popular democratic left politics tailored to the US context.

Although Newton asserted immediately after his July 1970 release that "our program is armed struggle" and that "we are interested in the strategy that's being used [by Carlos Marighella] in Brazil, which is an urban area, and we plan to draw on that," he would quickly retreat from this open posturing toward urban guerrilla warfare.<sup>53</sup> For a moment he focused on the unique terrain that Americans, not just blacks, faced at home and what it might take to build a counterpower capable of contesting ruling-class control over the economy and technology. Political scientist Michael Dawson is critical of the direction that Newton's writings take during the early seventies. He laments what he sees as the Newton wing's "abandoning the core political demand of the black movement, which was self determination, claiming that changes in the American economy no longer made such a demand necessary."<sup>54</sup> Newton does not so much as abandon black self-determination because of economic changes as offer a more expansive view of self-determination as the expropriation of production technology rather than the pursuit of national liberation in the traditional mode of seizing state power. Moreover, the actual achievement of moderate forms of black self-determination during the Nixon years, namely empowerment through increased black representation within formal government, private foundations, and corporations, had pushed many black radicals within the party and throughout the movement to reconsider the very notions of ethnic political constituency and shared black interests that had animated so many campaigns and programs since the mid-1960s.<sup>55</sup>

In one of his first public addresses following his 1970 release, Newton spoke at Boston College and attempted to clarify the party's program. The speech is remarkable because we find Newton analyzing the domestic contours of American empire and the social and economic implications of the technocratic society. In his Boston College speech, Newton briefly returns to the matter of the lumpenproletariat and raises the question of whether this class, a minority of the country's

53 Cited in Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 354.

54 Dawson, *Blacks in and out of the Left* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 169.

55 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*.

population and a disempowered stratum, can actually lead the way to socialist revolution. Newton then embarks on a brief argument concerning technological change and capitalist development, and he concludes that “automation will progress to cybernation, and cybernation probably to technocracy,” a process that will swell the ranks of the unemployables, making the lumpenproletariat the popular majority.<sup>56</sup> His speech anticipates some of the postindustrial socialist writings of French theorists like Andre Gorz and Serge Mallet, who contemplated the political implications of class decomposition under technological change and industrial restructuring, the most effective path for socialist politics in a world of conservative unionism and reactionary political parties, and the character that social life might take if humankind were emancipated from compulsory wage labor.<sup>57</sup> With a dose of podium humor, Newton asserted, “You know Marx and Lenin were pretty lazy dudes when it came to working for somebody. They looked at toil, working for your necessities, as something of a curse.”<sup>58</sup> “Lenin saw a time in which man could stand in one place, push buttons and move mountains,” Newton continued. “It sounds to me as though he saw a proletarian working class transformed and in possession of a free block of time, to indulge in productive creativity, to think about the developing their universe, so that they could have happiness, the freedom, and the pleasure that all men seek and value.”<sup>59</sup> It is within this context of creeping obsolescence that Newton justifies the various community programs offered by the party, not as revolutionary but as survival programs, means for preserving those populations whose livelihoods were threatened by advancing technology and joblessness. “The people will not disappear,” he held, “not with our survival programs they will not.”<sup>60</sup>

In his neglected 1972 essay “The Technology Question,” Newton warns, “The crucial issue of our time is the control of technology.” Here he expounded con-

56 Huey P. Newton, “Speech Delivered at Boston College,” in *Huey P. Newton Reader*, 166.

57 In his most well-known book, *Farewell to the Working Class*, first published in English in 1982, Andre Gorz acknowledges his intellectual debt to the Black Panthers briefly when discussing the “non-class of post-industrial proletarians,” his phrase for “all those who have been expelled from production by the abolition of work, or whose capacities are under-employed as a result of the industrialization (in this case, the automation and computerization) of intellectual work.” This nonclass, Gorz contends, “results from the decomposition of the old society based upon the dignity, value, social utility and desirability of work. It stretches into virtually every layer of society, well beyond those ‘lumpen’ whom the Black Panthers, with remarkable prescience, counterposed in the late 1960s to the class of unionized, stably employed workers, protected by labour legislation and collective agreements.” Andre Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-industrial Socialism* (London: Pluto, 1997), 68–69. See also the works of Serge Mallet, whose work has not been as widely translated, circulated, and discussed in the United States since his untimely death in a car crash in 1973. Serge Mallet, *The New Working Class* (Nottingham, UK: Spokesman Books, 1975); Serge Mallet, *Essays on the New Working Class*, ed. and trans. Dick Howard and Dean Savage (St. Louis, MO: Telos, 1975).

58 Newton, “Speech Delivered at Boston College,” 167.

59 Newton, “Speech Delivered at Boston College,” 168.

60 Newton, “Speech Delivered at Boston College,” 168.

siderably on this subject and argued that not only had technological change enhanced the power and reach of Western capitalists, but these changes also undermined older modes of politics, including land-based national liberation. He actually anticipates the enlarged role of finance capital and knowledge-oriented labor and commerce that would define the US domestic and global economies during the remaining decades of his life. Changes in the means, rate, and volume of information flows, the extensive use of computer technology, and a corresponding logistics revolution in the production and distribution of commodities (e.g., containerization in international shipping, lean management, and just-in-time manufacturing) would all radically alter capital mobility and investment dynamics during the 1970s and 1980s. The integrity of nation-state sovereignty was transformed as well, with dire consequences for the leadership of newly created postcolonial regimes who hoped to spur national industrial development and modernization through statist interventions. "Historically, the land question was an important question," but within the context of American empire, Newton observed, the dominant classes "have taken what they need from most of the lands. Now, it is only a matter of capitalizing upon the advancements, the 'interest' made from the original robbery."<sup>61</sup> National liberation under these new conditions was a hollow victory according to Newton, a symbolic achievement where the national bourgeoisie would "take the place of the colonizer" but under eroded conditions of state sovereignty. For Newton, control over a national territory was a limited step, one that might enable people some measure of autonomy but was inadequate alone. He wrote, "Freeing the land will free the people only to the degree that they will not have to consume what they do not want to consume. . . . When the people unite for that purpose—to gain the strength necessary to move against the reactionary control of the technology, in order to expropriate it and then make it available to all—then the question of liberating land will be placed in proper perspective."<sup>62</sup>

Newton also began to take up the unique challenges facing Americans, those who enjoy "a higher quality of life than everybody else, at the expense of everybody else."<sup>63</sup> Although communities in other parts of the world may be focused on the land question, Newton held that within the United States "it is the technology question, and the consumption of the goods that technology produces!"<sup>64</sup> The very prosperity that Americans enjoy, the benefits of empire, serves as a formidable barrier to the development of a popular opposition within the United States. "We have difficulties selling a progressive political line to not only the hard hats but also to blacks. It is because the evil of the reactionary ruling circle is often hard to pinpoint," Newton continues. "It becomes more difficult when those people in

61 Huey P. Newton, "The Technology Question," in *Huey P. Newton Reader*, 258.

62 Newton, "Technology Question," 258–59.

63 Newton, "Technology Question," 259.

64 Newton, "Technology Question," 260.

the proletarian group, those who are fully employed, are happy just to have a job with a higher wage than anyplace in the world.”<sup>65</sup> Perhaps as a result of his travels abroad, Newton begins to think more critically about how all Americans are implicated in the reproduction of empire. He argued: “Everybody in America has a television, a car, a relatively decent place to live. Even the lowest of the low do not live anywhere near the level of the poor of the world. Even the average person, the average ‘nigger’ in the United States does not live as low as the average Chinese.”<sup>66</sup> The roots of mass quiescence within the United States lay not merely in consumer lifestyles, however, but in the broader Cold War patriotic culture that sustained the military industrial complex. Many citizens accepted American military adventurism because they benefited materially from empire. They were also subjected to an elaborate division of labor whereby most participated in the war machinery in some way, as assembly-line workers, researchers, bureaucrats, etc., but were never directly responsible for the decisions made in Washington. Patriotism and the threat of annihilation by fascists or communists were deployed to deepen public commitments to ruling-class prerogatives. And yet Newton sees emancipatory potential in scientific knowledge and new technology, which if marshaled under democratic control might resolve many of the great problems that afflict humanity: “This abundance of bounty from robbery has built a monster of technology. In the future, however, this will be good for us, because the same supercapitalists will be our supply sergeants. We will feed India, and all of Africa will spring up from one breadbasket.”

In his 1970 Boston College address, Newton broke to a degree from his early commitments to internationalism and offered the notion of intercommunalism as way of thinking about the novel landscape of American empire and the new forms of global solidarity that might be marshaled against imperialism. In February 1971, Newton offered his most in-depth statement of his thesis regarding intercommunalism in an exchange with the psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson. Also in attendance were Erikson’s oldest son, the sociologist Kai Erikson, and a group of fourteen Yale undergraduates that included then student activist and future mayor of Baltimore Kurt Schmoke. Newton’s arguments at this forum anticipated many of the dynamics of market integration and corporate transnationalism within the contemporary political economy that we commonly summarize today as globalization. Although nations endured, American empire had rendered the concept politically obsolete.

The United States is no longer a nation-state, according to Newton; rather it is an empire, “a nation-state that has transformed itself into a power controlling *all* the world’s land and people.”<sup>67</sup> Under these new deterritorialized conditions, Newton contended, “the people and the economy are so integrated into the impe-

65 Newton, “Technology Question,” 261–62.

66 Newton, “Technology Question,” 264.

67 Newton, “Intercommunalism,” in *Huey P. Newton Reader*, 187.



rialist empire that it's impossible to 'decolonize,' to return to the former conditions of existence."<sup>68</sup> Rather than the nation or even the class, Newton emphasizes the community as the most important form of social organization. "We say that the world today is a dispersed collection of communities." He defined a community as "a small unit with a comprehensive collection of institutions that exist to serve a small group of people." Under American empire, the reactionary intercommunalism of a small "ruling circle" imposes its political and economic will on the planetary masses. For Newton, the antidote to this state of affairs was a "revolutionary intercommunalism," shared ownership of technology and rational distribution of the earth's resources for the benefit of all. Again, Newton expresses modernist faith in the capacity of technology, once it is expropriated and deployed under democratic control, to improve the human condition: "We say that this technology can solve most of the material contradictions people face, that the material conditions exist that would allow the people of the world to develop a culture that is essentially human and would nurture those things that would allow the people to resolve contradictions in a way that would not cause the mutual slaughter of all of us." Hence for Newton, imperialism has created the conditions for a future socialist society: "the technological and administrative base for socialism exists." He concluded that when "the people seize the means of production and all social institutions, then there will be a qualitative leap and a change in the organization of society. It will take time to resolve the contradictions of racism and all kinds of chauvinism; but because the people will control their own social institutions, they will be free to re-create themselves and establish communism, a state of human development in which human values will shape the structure of society."<sup>69</sup>

Sadly, these writings and their critical and optimistic perspective on technology and socialism would soon be eclipsed by the changing historical tide. The provisional governments that had brought so much hope to people in the Third World and the West saw their forward motion arrested by counterinsurgencies and the imposition of neocolonial arrangements. Within the US, some popular mobilizations of the 1960s achieved formal power and recognition, more militant organizations were weakened by police repression and infiltration, and many tendencies crashed and burned under their own internal contradictions. The Panthers continued on throughout the 1970s, but this was an extended period of decline. Politically, the organization made peace with systemic politics, and although they hoped to pursue radical aims through conventional means, this strategic shift bore little fruit. Newton's personal life reflected the broader turmoil and decline of the age. Although he still answered to the title "Servant of the People," in party circles Newton took to being called "Supreme Commander," and his behavior was increasingly erratic. Whereas Fanon and Mao had dominated the party's early

68 Newton, "Intercommunalism," 187.

69 Newton, "Intercommunalism," 188.

intellectual subculture, as the group slid into decline Newton developed a fascination with Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather*, which was made into a successful 1972 feature film, and Mario Van Peebles pioneering blaxploitation film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. The latter film follows its protagonist's journey from hustler to revolutionary, but Steve Wasserman, professional editor and confidant of exiled Panther William Lee Brent, contends that "to fully understand Huey's devolution, you'd have to run Peebles' picture backward, as the story of the revolutionary who becomes a hustler."<sup>70</sup> As the purges of the party cadre wore on, not even Newton's closest confidants, such as his childhood friend David Hilliard and party cofounder Bobby Seale, were spared. And in 1974 Newton fled to Cuba to evade criminal prosecution for pistol-whipping a tailor, Preston Callins, and for the murder of Kathleen Smith, a seventeen-year-old sex worker.

### Conclusion

Few organizations from the Black Power era are as venerated as the Black Panther Party. Their courageous words and deeds have grown more radical as American life has become more conservative, and as the very social contradictions they attempted to address have expanded in scale and consequences. Their survival programs, armed patrols, popular education campaigns, and revolutionary aspirations continue to resonate in a context where urban poverty, police brutality, crime, and an advancing neoliberalization produce heartache within black working-class life and across US society. The vindicationist tendency that defines so much academic and popular remembrance of the Panthers, however, has bridled the kind of critical intellectual engagement that might sustain vibrant public debate over the past, present, and future of black political life. The Panthers were not plaster saints. They were flesh, blood, and spirit, a fact that makes what they were able to achieve against long odds all the more remarkable. What is needed are analyses that take the Panthers seriously and assess the relative merits of their revolutionary politics.

There was a shard of truth in Wilkins's charge that "revolutionaries get confused," a jagged and dangerous shard but one that must be handled with some care rather than merely brushed aside. His criticism of Newton was launched from a conservative posture, an insistence that only domestic issues mattered and that somehow the black movement was unrelated to the global struggles against US imperialism. Wilkins's tirade touched on a weakness of 1960s black radicalism, however: the tendency to transpose anticolonial politics and idioms born in the Third World onto the dissimilar terrain of US capitalism. As social analysis and political project, the colonial analogy was limited because despite the temporal appeal of the rhetoric, African Americans were not a colonized people in the clas-

70 Steve Wasserman, "Rage and Ruin," *Nation*, June 24–July 1, 2013.

sical sense. The roots of American racism were firmly planted in a history of colonialism and slavery, and during the 1960s blacks endured forms of apartheid, but by the time black nationalists embraced the language of anticolonialism, the society had already begun a process of reform, a Second Reconstruction that dismantled the legal bracing of the Jim Crow system. The colonial analogy treated black social life and political aspirations as fundamentally dissimilar from that of other Americans; it conflated the difference between armed self-defense as a tactic and armed struggle as a political strategy; and perhaps most importantly, it failed to fully ascertain the unique challenges facing Americans living in an advanced industrial society, not colonial circumstances.

The colonial analogy and the valorization of the lumpenproletariat were progressive moves in that both acknowledged the essential worth of the society's most outcast population and treated the racial ghetto of the middle twentieth century as a potential base of power. Rather than view its denizens as objects of state aid and charity, Newton and other black radicals during the 1960s viewed the most submerged and oppressed strata of the black population as capable of devising solutions to their problems. Furthermore, the black ghetto was not perceived as a place to be escaped or abandoned; rather, Newton and others held that through political mobilization and collective agency, inner-city neighborhoods might be transformed into liberated territory. The empowerment of a new black political leadership class, however, spelled the end of the "black colony" as a social reality and political project.

During their formative years, the Panthers promoted nationalistic assumptions about black unity and common racial interests. As the contradictions of the colonial analogy were revealed, Newton and the Panther cadre developed a fairly consistent line of criticism of the cultural pretensions and betrayals of the black bourgeoisie, reflected in epithets common to Panther rhetoric (e.g., "bootlickers," "uncle toms," and "house Negroes") but sometimes falling short of full-bodied analyses of class politics. In his most perceptive moments, however, Newton offered a critique of the American ruling class that portrayed black elites, especially civil rights leaders such as Wilkins, as complicit with reactionary forces.

Newton's views on American empire evolved beyond the colonial analogy. The series of highly provocative writings and speeches on the emerging geography of American imperialism that he authored after his 1970 release from prison anticipated latter-day arguments regarding capitalist globalization, deterritorialized power, and diminished state sovereignty. He expanded his earlier arguments regarding the lumpenproletariat to address the implications of capital-intensive production for living labor. The lumpenproletariat within his emerging formulation was not a new vanguard but rather a portent of the precarious life that increasing swaths of the population might expect to endure under conditions of technological obsolescence. His view of technology, however, is not cynical but critical. And at various turns Newton insisted that the very technological capacities that have

enabled American firms to conquer living labor and the earth's resources might also constitute a path to a freer existence for the greatest number of humanity if such technology can be wrested away from the dominant classes. Newton's writings on intercommunalism and technology are provocative and constitute an important if incomplete contribution to radical Left thinking in the late twentieth century.

## 28: Angela Y. Davis

### Abolitionism, Democracy, Freedom

Neil Roberts

In “An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Y. Davis,” originally published in the *New York Review of Books* and included soon thereafter in an anthology edited by Angela Davis from prison with the assistance of Bettina Aptheker, James Baldwin wrote:

The enormous revolution in Black consciousness which has occurred in your generation, my dear sister, means the beginning or the end of America. Some of us, white and Black, know how great a price has already been paid to bring into existence a new consciousness, a new people, an unprecedented nation. If we know, and do nothing, we are worse than the murderers hired in our name. If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own—which it is—and render impassable with our bodies the corridor to the gas chamber. For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night.<sup>1</sup>

Baldwin’s words echo the early prophesying of *The Fire Next Time* and portend what Baldwin would articulate in his last major essay, “The Price of the Ticket.” They were a plea in defense of a scholar-activist imprisoned for a crime she did not commit, a crime whose punishment would be death by execution with a guilty verdict. These words conveyed a belief that actions have a cost, a *price*. For Baldwin, if a radical transformation in the actions of self, society, and state did not occur at the epistemological and phenomenological levels that the new consciousness called for, then the human condition would be forever imperiled. The fate of Davis, he argued, was also our own.

The context of Davis’s status as a fugitive after being named to the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted List, her sixteen-month incarceration, her disposition during oral arguments and testimonies presented during the trial, *People of the State of California v. Angela Y. Davis*, and her subsequent acquittal was indeed dramatic. There was widespread national and international media coverage. American labor organizations questioned the validity of the charges against Davis. Coretta Scott

<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, “An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Y. Davis” (November 19, 1970), in *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, ed. Angela Davis and Bettina Aptheker (New York: Signet, 1971), 23.

King advocated for due process and a fair trial. Hungarian critical theorist Georg Lukács likened Davis's trial to the Dreyfus Affair in France at the turn of the last century. And the women's secretariat of the African National Congress in then apartheid South Africa demanded Davis's unconditional release. Much of this has been well documented.<sup>2</sup>

But when looking beyond the spectacle of the trial and the constantly resurfacing photographic images from the late 1960s and 1970s of our protagonist with an Afro, when "our soul looks back" between past and future, as James Baldwin and Hannah Arendt suggest,<sup>3</sup> one is able to observe through the life and times of Davis a significant cartography of African American political thought. This terrain demands exploration.

To write about Angela Davis is to wrestle with the paradox of a figure known more for a particular aesthetic and period of incarceration than for the overall content of her formidable intellectual work. The problem of biography in Africana thought, especially acute in discourse on Davis, is the asymmetrical attention analysts give to details of black intellectuals' lived experiences at the expense of the interpretation of their ideas.<sup>4</sup> Under this logic, knowledge of *who* a thinker is supersedes knowing *what* constitutes principles of her or his thought. At the same time, however, there is an issue of circularity. Experiences may also prove useful in the formulation of a thinker's key concepts—whether recounted in the genres of autobiography, nonfiction essays, historical fiction, poetry, music, or other mediums—and in the interpretation of these experientially derived notions. Davis remarks that philosophy "is supposed to perform the task of generalizing aspects of experience, and not just for the sake of formulating generalizations."<sup>5</sup> This essay heeds Davis's intuition, balancing the experiential and the interpretive, limning the often-symbiotic relation between experience and theory integral to the study of politics.

The essay begins with a discussion of the movements, texts, and figures—

2 Angela Davis, United States labor organizations, Coretta Scott King, Shirley Graham Du Bois, African National Congress Women's Secretariat, Georg Lukács, et al., "Statement and Appeals," in *If They Come in the Morning*, 278–86. On Davis's trial and imprisonment, see Bettina Aptheker's *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) and two powerful documentaries: Göran Hugo Olsson, dir., *The Black Power Mixtape 1967–1975* (New York: Sundance Selects, 2011); and Shola Lynch, dir., *Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners* (Santa Monica: Lionsgate, 2012).

3 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1993); James Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket," in *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 830.

4 Lewis Gordon, *Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 22–40.

5 Angela Davis, *Lectures on Liberation* (1969/71), repr. in Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845; repr., San Francisco: City Lights, 2010), 66. See also the originally published *Lectures on Liberation* (Los Angeles: National United Committee to Free Angela Davis, ca. 1971). I refer to the republished version because it is more readily accessible.

notably Herbert Marcuse—both central to the intellectual development of Davis and most representative of Davis’s political thought. It frames Davis’s body of work as a form of fugitive theory and practice whose nineteenth-century intellectual roots provide a unique vista only partially mined by contemporary theorists frequently associated with fugitive thought. It turns next to an examination of three concepts foundational to the work of Davis: abolitionism, democracy, and freedom. Davis’s analyses of W. E. B. Du Bois and Frederick Douglass are vital to elucidating these notions. The essay contends that the understanding of abolitionism that Davis marshals mediates her articulations of democracy and freedom in late modernity. Inclusion of Davis’s views on resistance and liberation reinforces this reading. Davis does not claim to invent all or even most of the categories and terms integral to her thought. It is the way she integrates older and new concepts into a defined political system concerned with actors and institutional arrangements that distinguishes her. Deciphering how Davis arrives at her core tripartite ideals challenges us to refashion facile, sanitized origin narratives of the contours of African American political thought.

### Life and Times

Born in Birmingham, Alabama, Angela Yvonne Davis (1944–) grew up in a middle-class African American family that witnessed the horrors of violence and interracial distrust in the Jim Crow South. During much of her youth, the Davis family lived in a segregated neighborhood nicknamed “Dynamite Hill” due to recurring bombings and acts of terror leveled against its black inhabitants at a time when neighborhoods containing whites and blacks in the South were rare. “So common were the bombings on Dynamite Hill,” Davis recounts, “that the horror of them diminished.”<sup>6</sup>

In the late 1950s, Davis moved to New York City with her family’s support and attended Elizabeth Irwin, a progressive Quaker high school. She lived with a white family, and it was during this time that Davis was introduced to various socialist writings, chief among them *The Communist Manifesto*. Davis also attended meetings of a radical youth group, Advance, whose sessions were convened at the home of historian and communist activist Herbert Aptheker, and attended by persons such as Mary Lou Patterson, child of noted black communist William Patterson, and Aptheker’s daughter Bettina, with whom Davis would build an enduring intellectual and political relationship.<sup>7</sup>

6 Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974; repr., New York: International, 1988), 95. Toni Morrison was then an acquisitions editor at Random House and the editor for Davis’s text. On the intellectual collaborations between Davis and Morrison over a forty-year period, see “Toni Morrison and Angela Davis on Friendship and Creativity,” *UC Santa Cruz Newsletter*, October 29, 2014, <http://news.ucsc.edu/2014/10/morrison-davis-q-a.html>.

7 Davis, *Angela Davis*, 109–13.

Davis subsequently enrolled at Brandeis University, where a few key experiences as an undergraduate forever changed her future trajectory: listening to James Baldwin speak at a rally as news of the Cuban Missile Crisis unfolded, attending a public lecture by Malcolm X, majoring in French literature, meeting Herbert Marcuse, studying abroad at the Sorbonne in Paris, listening to lectures by Theodor Adorno in Germany the summer prior to returning to Brandeis, taking Marcuse's graduate seminar on Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* after returning from abroad, and writing a senior thesis in 1965 titled "The Novels of Robbe-Grillet: A Study of Method and Meaning."<sup>8</sup> In the United States, the civil rights movement gained momentum. Groups, particularly the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the "new abolitionists," the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, fostered leadership among young people fighting the American Jim Crow racial order.<sup>9</sup>

The rise of Black Power nationalism as a major political tendency within the US, the circulation of Frantz Fanon's understandings of resistance and revolution, and the founding of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense with its subsequent consolidation of a Ten-Point Program further impacted Davis, notwithstanding criticisms of a male chauvinism she came to associate with leadership in branches of the Panthers' evolving membership.<sup>10</sup> In Germany the socialist student league

8 Davis, *Angela Davis*, 119–27, 133–45; Alice Kaplan, *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

9 Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon, 1964); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); Richard King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since "Brown v. Board of Education"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Ava DuVernay, dir., *Selma* (Los Angeles: Paramount, 2014).

10 C. L. R. James, "Black Power" (1967): <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1967/black-power.htm>; Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967); James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Erik Erikson and Huey Newton, *In Search of Common Ground* (New York: Norton, 1973); Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992); Cedric Robinson, *Black Movements in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Charles Jones, ed., *The Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classics, 1998); Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006); Cynthia Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Michael Dawson, *Blacks in and out of the Left* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Sylviane Diouf and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Black Power 50* (New York: Schomburg Center and New York Public Library, 2016); Ibram Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation, 2016); Stephen Shames and Bobby Seale, *Power to the People: The World of the*



(Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund, SDS) and student protest movements additionally shaped Davis's belief that young people were and still are as vital as elders to the achievement of social and political change. Jürgen Habermas captures Davis's stance when describing the objectives of these youth movements as attempts at fortifying a rational society whereby young people resist through public expressions of displeasure with technologies of repression and their communicative desires to build a future where, in contrast to the status quo, they are active participants instead of passive observers.<sup>11</sup> A rational society fosters rather than deters progress.

Only in the 1970s did the women's movement, imperatives of Third World feminists, transnational feminist politics, and black feminist challenges to earlier waves of feminism—not least of which was the Combahee River Collective's catalytic "A Black Feminist Statement"<sup>12</sup>—become an integral part of Davis's oeuvre. The publication of "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1971, written in prison), "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation" (1977), "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting" (1978), *Women, Race and Class* (1981), "Violence against Women and the Ongoing Challenges to Racism" (1985), "Radical Perspectives on the Empowerment of Afro-American Women" (1987), and *Women, Culture, and Politics* (1988) signaled this shift,<sup>13</sup> the impact of which persists today as evidenced in the myriad writings and

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*Black Panthers* (New York: Abrams, 2016); Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Ashley Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

11 On German student movements, see Jürgen Habermas's *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics* (Boston: Beacon, 1970).

12 Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977), in *A Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 262–70.

13 Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1981); *Women, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Vintage, 1984); "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1971), "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation" (1977), and "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting" (1978), in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 111–37, 161–92; Angela Davis, "Radical Perspectives on the Empowerment of Afro-American Women: Lessons for the 1980s," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3 (1988): 348–53; Angela Y. Davis Papers at the Radcliff Institute, <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/angela-y-davis-papers-press-kit>. See also Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon, 1998) and foreword to Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (New York: Ballantine, 1994). On the genealogy of modern black feminism, see Toni Cade, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970); bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End, 1981); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing, 1984); Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-construction of American History* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1994); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the*

lectures including the address delivered at the University of Chicago, “Feminism and Abolition: Theories and Practices for the Twenty-First Century.”<sup>14</sup> Davis remarks in “Reflections”:

A great deal has been said about the black *man* and resistance, but very little about the unique relationship black women bore to the resistance struggles during slavery. To understand the part she played in developing and sharpening the thrust toward freedom, the broader meaning of slavery and of American slavery in particular must be explored. . . . The black woman’s consciousness of the oppression suffered by her people was honed in the bestial realities of daily experience. . . . We, the black women of today, must accept the full weight of a legacy wrought in blood by our mothers in chains. Our fight, while identical in spirit, reflects different conditions and thus implies different paths of struggle. But as heirs to a tradition of supreme perseverance and heroic resistance, we must hasten to take our place wherever our people are forging on towards freedom.<sup>15</sup>

By the mid-1960s, Davis’s political thought was influenced by Marcuse’s mentorship and the intellectual currents of Frankfurt School critical theory to which Marcuse was a contributor, the ethical dimensions of Hegelian and Marxist thought, black social movements, and existential phenomenology. Upon graduation from Brandeis, Davis moved to Germany to pursue graduate studies with Adorno. However, in the two years she was at Goethe Universität, Davis felt

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*Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Joy James, ed., *Seeking the Beloved Community: A Feminist Race Reader* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014); Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Alexis Gumbs, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Keisha Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Diana Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women’s History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 2020). The recent major volume *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), coedited by Mia Bay, Farah Griffin, Martha Jones, and Barbara Savage, has an organizational structure centered on key figures in the history of black feminist thought. It is noteworthy that there is neither a chapter devoted to Davis’s thought nor any sustained engagement with the ideas of Davis throughout the book.

<sup>14</sup> Angela Davis, “Feminism and Abolition: Theories and Practices for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 91–110.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” 113, 117, 126–27, orig. emphasis.

removed from what she refers to as the “new Black militancy” emerging back home in response to heightened white supremacist terror toward the bodies and souls of black folk.<sup>16</sup> Adorno’s written interpretation of negative dialectics through the ontological need, world spirit, and metaphysics, while expansive in the abstract, mirrored a pedagogical philosophy lacking emphasis on experience. Its premises additionally echoed what Jacques Rancière notes are disagreements between theorists and their beliefs on the applicability of ideas to living world politics. The insistence of Adorno on the separation of theory from politics, a view Marcuse rejected, further disillusioned Davis.<sup>17</sup> As she wrote regarding the obstacles often confronting scholar-activists, “I wanted to continue my academic work, but I knew I could not do it unless I was politically involved. The struggle was a life-nerve; our only hope for survival. I made up my mind. The journey was on.”<sup>18</sup>

Davis returned to the US as a result and entered a doctoral program in philosophy at the University of California, San Diego, in order to work with Marcuse, who had left Brandeis by then. Marcuse was a humble star of the New Left whose studies of Hegel, Marx, Freud, and the meanings of liberation, eros, the aesthetic dimension, and revolution were well known among academics and an increasingly visible lay audience that sought guidance as to how critical theory could be made relevant to the everyday.<sup>19</sup> Marcuse was a guide and mentor for Davis, and Marcuse in turn would learn from Davis’s scholar-activism.<sup>20</sup> Davis became enamored with Marcuse’s critique of one-dimensional society, rejection of using *socialism* as a dirty word, musings on solidarity, articulation of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and faith in the possibility of realizing utopian projects. “Utopian possibilities” were, as Marcuse contended in *An Essay on Liberation*, the object of a critical theory of society, not exercises in dreamscape.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Davis, *Angela Davis*, 144.

<sup>17</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973); Angela Davis interview with Lisa Lowe, “Reflections on Race, Class, and Gender in the USA,” in *Angela Y. Davis Reader*, 316–18; Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Rancière, *The Method of Equality: Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan* (Malden, UK: Polity, 2016). There was a young professor at Goethe Universität, Oskar Negt, whom Davis admired and who, like Marcuse, did not share Adorno’s conviction about the separation of theory from politics.

<sup>18</sup> Davis, *Angela Davis*, 145.

<sup>19</sup> Marcuse’s key works include *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962); *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1964); *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon, 1968); *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon, 1972); *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978); *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> Angela Davis, “Marcuse’s Legacies,” and Herbert Marcuse, “Dear Angela,” in Marcuse, *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 3, *The New Left and the 1960s* (New York: Routledge, 2005), vii–xiv, 49–50.

<sup>21</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 4.

Marcuse expounded on this point in “Philosophy and Critical Theory”: “Like philosophy, it [critical theory] opposes making reality into a criterion in the manner of complacent positivism. But unlike philosophy, it always derives its goals from present tendencies of the social process. Therefore, it has no fear of the utopia that the new order is denounced as being. When truth cannot be realized within the established social order, it always appears to the latter as mere utopia. This transcendence speaks not against, but for, its truth.”<sup>22</sup> Marcuse advocated for a radical utopian politics, aware, as he noted in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, that there were agents of repression who considered it “a crime merely to *talk* about change.”<sup>23</sup> Developing a strategy of change and systematic approach toward resistance to racism, subordination of women, undemocratic orders, and orders of unfreedom—Great Refusals against the Establishment, in Marcuse’s political language—were aspirations Davis began to chart in terms Marcuse and others have never outlined.

Davis’s doctoral work was a part of this larger endeavor: she embarked on a dissertation on Kant’s theory of force vis-à-vis the French Revolution. At the same time as writing the dissertation, Davis plunged deeper into Marxist thought and modes of socialism. Like Grace Campbell, Louise Thompson Patterson, Lucy Parsons, and Claudia Jones earlier, Davis contributed to a stream of intersectional black Marxism that integrated the phenomenology of black women’s existence into its activities. Strikingly, major studies of black Marxism and Marxist political economy often elide this fact.<sup>24</sup> Davis joined the Southern California chapter of the Che-Lumumba Club, an affiliate of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), and began organizing on behalf of political prisoners. This launched a long-term, ongoing project criticizing the entire penal system itself. Davis would later run for vice president of the United States on the CPUSA ticket, continuing to question how the vectors of gender, class, race, age, and ability simultaneously structure human lives before the word *intersectionality* was coined.

22 Herbert Marcuse, “Philosophy and Critical Theory” (1937), in *Negations*, 143; also cited in Davis, “Marcuse’s Legacies,” ix–x.

23 Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 133, orig. emphasis.

24 Cedric Robinson’s classic text *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), for example, neglects examination of prominent Marxist black women including Angela Davis and Claudia Jones in the 1983 first edition and 2000 revised edition. For notable correctives to this elision, see María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno, *Regita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002); Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Gregg Andrews, *Thyra J. Edwards: Black Activist in the Global Freedom Struggle* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011); Erik McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Boyce Davies, “A Black Feminist View on Cedric Robinson’s Black Marxism,” *African American Intellectual History Society*, November 10, 2016, <http://www.aaihs.org/a-black-left-feminist-view-on-cedric-robinsons-black-marxism/>.

In 1969 Davis started a position as a junior faculty member in the University of California, Los Angeles, philosophy department while in the final stages of completing the study of Kant. Davis did not complete the UCSD dissertation, however; she maintains to this day that the FBI stole all her dissertation materials in 1970.<sup>25</sup> This is the period most commentators have described, the period of the Angela Davis who was fired from UCLA by the state's Board of Regents under Governor Ronald Reagan's recommendation, the period when her two stunning lectures on Frederick Douglass were delivered,<sup>26</sup> and the phase when Davis was incarcerated, put on trial, and acquitted.

### Fugitive Theory, Fugitive Practice

It should not surprise anyone that Davis employs in both *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974)—a text she calls in its preface a “political autobiography”<sup>27</sup>—and her many prison essays from the 1970s including “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation,” “Lessons: From Attica to Soledad,” “Trials of Political Prisoners Today,” and “Notes for Arguments in Court on the Issue of Self-Representation” a style of writing inherited from nineteenth-century black American fugitive slave authors Harriet Jacobs, Henry “Box” Brown, Lucy Ann Delaney, and, above all, Douglass.<sup>28</sup> The experiences of fugitivity and incarceration shape Davis's commitment to defining democracy and freedom, and they bolster her resolve to merge theory and practice in spelling out conceptual terrain.

If Herbert Marcuse, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Frederick Douglass are the central thinkers Davis revisits throughout her intellectual corpus, then it is the tradition of fugitive theory and practice introduced by the third figure where we locate the earliest major influence on Davis's thought. Contemporary political theory tends to treat the writings of Sheldon Wolin, Gilles Deleuze, and their adherents as the sum total of discourse on fugitivity. This bracketed genealogy indeed offers many

25 Yolande du Luart, dir., *Angela Davis: Portrait of a Revolutionary* (Los Angeles: UCLA, 1972). Although Davis did not complete her UCSD dissertation, she received an honorary doctorate from Lenin University in 1972. For Davis's perspective on the dissertation controversy, see “Angela Y. Davis,” in *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 1998), 13.

26 The National United Committee to Free Angela Davis later published the 1969 UCLA lectures on Douglass as the pamphlet *Lectures on Liberation*.

27 The full passage reads: “When I decided to write the book after all, it was because I had come to envision it as a political autobiography that emphasized the people, the events and the forces in my life that propelled me to my present commitment” (orig. emphasis). See *Angela Davis*, xvi.

28 Angela Davis, “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation,” “Lessons: From Attica to Soledad,” “Trials of Political Prisoners Today,” and “Notes for Arguments in Court on the Issue of Self-Representation,” in *If They Come in the Morning*, 27–47, 77–105, 246–55. Joy James classifies this category of writing by Davis as a “neoslave narrative.” Consult James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999).

insights: the idea of becoming, lines of flight, the movement-image, the evanescent nature of democracy, the late modern specter of inverted totalitarianism, and the perspective of freedom as process-oriented.<sup>29</sup> These claims, nevertheless, have earlier formulations from the previous century.<sup>30</sup> Davis recovers them first through the prism of Douglass and second with Du Bois, demonstrating the extent to which our lived experiences—especially the experiences of slavery, struggle, and assertion—matter.

Davis engages and challenges Douglass's conception of freedom. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* serve as sources of inspiration for interpreting fugitive slave phenomenology while the Douglass of the middle autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, remains closer in argumentation to several Davis proposals. Davis's Du Bois is the Du Bois who saw himself as the intellectual heir to Douglass completing tasks Douglass left unexplored, the post-*Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois who wrote a biography of John Brown and *Darkwater*, and Du Bois the fugitive democratic theorist whose thought was in transition when rewriting the historiography of Reconstruction and its discontents.

African American thought reveals how fugitivity connects to the experiential and to a condition of liminality wherein an agent struggles both with regard to self and in relations with others. Fugitivity is irreducible to escapology, an act whose sole aim is to retreat from interfering, coercive, and hegemonic agents.<sup>31</sup>

29 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 31–45; Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, exp. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman depart from the closed systems of Deleuze and Wolin in "Fugitive Justice," *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 1–15. Their focus, however, is on justice instead of either democracy or freedom. The inquiry of Best and Hartman into Ottobah Cugoana's 1787 slave narrative appeals of the slave and ex-slave, and their idea of "black noise" complements features of Davis's account of fugitive thought.

30 Juliet Hooker describes a related account of contemporary formulations of fugitivity and the significance of earlier notions of black fugitive thought, especially during the nineteenth century and encapsulated in the dually national and hemispheric outlook of Douglass. See Hooker, "A Black Sister to Massachusetts': Latin America and the Fugitive Democratic Ethos of Frederick Douglass," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 4 (2015): 690–702; Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Neil Roberts et. al., "Juxtaposition, Hemispheric Thought, and the Bounds of Political Theory," *Contemporary Political Theory* 18, no. 4 (2019): 604–39.

31 Alice Goffman and Barnor Hesse expound different versions of this same narrow conception. See Goffman, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Hesse, "Escaping Liberty: Western Hegemony, Black Fugitivity," *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 288–313.

The experience of fugitivity is inextricably linked to the process of flight (*marronage*). Fugitivity encompasses different types of marronage, each type comprising physical, cognitive, metaphysical, and social-structural valences. Flight entails the rejection of negative arbitrary interference and domination as well as the positive construction and cultivation of a democratic and free existence for individuals and collectives. Moreover, examining fugitivity discloses the insufficiency of conceptual frameworks in Western political thought whose binaries of democratic-undemocratic and free-unfree assume static, inert polarities. It is the daily acts of struggle and assertion occurring within the interstitial spaces between these imagined absolute binary conditions where democracy and freedom actually reside.<sup>32</sup> The indeterminate, unsettling nature of a fugitive's existence nonetheless offers a suggestive avenue for the emergence of an alternative condition and creation of another world. Davis provides a startling formulation of this viewpoint.

Only by understanding the significance of Douglass and Du Bois to fugitive theory and these thinkers, along with Marcuse, to the collapsing of false theory-practice divides can we begin to comprehend why abolitionism is first principle for Davis. Even then, Davis crafts a distinct abolitionist politics irreducible to these thinkers' frameworks.

### Abolitionism

*Abolitionism* refers to the processes of eradicating the condition of slavery between past and future. The temporal dimension of this definition underscores the experience of slavery as the foundational human condition, the ability of individuals and collectives to exit from this state, and the capability of an agent or agents no longer enslaved to return to this condition. The life of an enslaved agent is undemocratic and unfree. As with modes of action related to the attainment of democracy and freedom, the activity of abolitionism remains ongoing.

Douglass views slavery as "the granting of that power by which one man exercises and enforces a right of property in the body and soul of another."<sup>33</sup> For Davis, slavery alienates human beings from themselves. Slavery distorts perception, preventing humans from the actualization of self-consciousness and consciousness-raising.<sup>34</sup> Slavery's logic persists whether the manifestation of one form of enslavement is identical or differential to another form across various social and political orders. Types of slavery, like modes of flight, include but are not limited to the domain of the physical. Slavery also is able to persist in spite of orders declaring "emancipation" and "independence." "If slavery was declared

32 For a detailed explanation of this position, see Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

33 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (orig. 1855; New York: Penguin, 2003), 302. In the appendix of *Bondage* Douglass reprints words first delivered as the "Reception Speech at Finsbury Chapel, Moorfields, England," May 12, 1846.

34 Davis, *Lectures on Liberation*, 53.

dead,” Davis observes, then “it was simultaneously reincarnated through new institutions, new practices, new ideologies.”<sup>35</sup>

The experience of the slave is existence in what Frantz Fanon calls the zone of nonbeing, “an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge.” Human existence inside the zone of nonbeing does not mean a state of social death. While slavery may be a condition of powerlessness and dishonor, it is not a state of inertia and inconceivable disalienation.<sup>36</sup> The slave is an actional being with the capacity to enter into flight. The slave is not a living zombie. Awareness of the lord, or the institutional apparatus of enslavement functioning as lord, creating the zone within which the slave inhabits fosters a bondsman’s antislavery activities.<sup>37</sup> But mutual recognition between slave and lord need not be a requirement for this action, were such intersubjective mutuality even achievable or desirable. With enslavement comes natality, the possibility for an agent’s resistance to a constrained agency, potentiality for an authentic upheaval, and prospects of liberation and revolution through abolitionism. “We can learn from the philosophical as well as concrete experience of the slave,” Davis maintains, because the slave offers us a window into the struggles and matrixes of abolitionism.<sup>38</sup>

Abolitionism is a consistent presence throughout Davis’s political thought. We observe this notably in *Lectures on Liberation* (1971), *If They Come in the Morning* (1971), *Angela Davis* (1974), “JoAnne Little: The Dialectics of Rape” (1975), “Women and Capitalism” (1977), *Women, Race and Class* (1981), *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1998), “Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition” (1998), “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System” (1999), *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003), *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (2005), “Marcuse’s Legacies” (2005), *The Meaning of Freedom* (2012), and *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle* (2016). Davis’s lecture courses over the last several decades, numerous activities as a political organizer, and advocacy of Committees of Correspondence, Critical Resistance, Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, the Sentencing Project, World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerances, among others, also support this.

Abolitionist politics pertaining to (1) racial slavery, (2) the death penalty, and

35 Angela Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2012), 140.

36 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 2008 [1952]), xii. Fanon later concretizes the significance for the slave of the zone of nonbeing, flight, revolutionary politics, and abolitionism in *The Wretched of the Earth* (orig. 1961; New York: Grove, 2004) as well as in the posthumous texts *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove, 1967) and *Alienation and Freedom* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). For the social death position I argue that Davis’s political thought opposes even when Davis cites the author, see Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

37 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 191–97.

38 Davis, *Lectures on Liberation*, 65.



(3) the contemporary prison system preoccupy Davis.<sup>39</sup> The first wave of American abolitionists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “prophets of protest,”<sup>40</sup> comprised a heterogeneous constellation of black slaves on plantations, fugitive slaves, free people of color, and whites devoted to slavery’s demise. Abolitionists were not antislavery activists who abhorred southern slavery while remaining neutral on the westward expansion of slaveholding states. They argued for the obliteration of slavery across the Confederacy, the emergent midwestern and western states forged under the expansionist doctrine of Manifest Destiny, and the small but existent slaveholding states of the Union.

Davis makes it a point, though, to highlight how the abolitionist struggle against racial slavery in the US did not end with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. Effective after the Civil War’s end, the Thirteenth Amendment declares: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”<sup>41</sup> Davis writes in “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison” that the amendment “putatively freed black labor from the total control to which it was subject during slavery. In actuality, new forms of quasi-total control developed.” Chapter 1 of *Women, Race and Class*, “The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood,”<sup>42</sup> adds texture to this inquiry, as does Davis’s assertion in *The Meaning of Freedom*: “It strikes me to be very strange that over the decades we have assumed that it was possible to abolish slavery simply by proclamation, a few words here, and by a clause in the Constitution, when that [Emancipation] proclamation and that constitutional amendment never clearly explain how they understand slavery.”<sup>43</sup> Davis also remarks in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*:

After the abolition of slavery, former slave states passed new legislation revising the Slave Codes in order to regulate the behavior of free blacks in ways similar to

39 Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture; Interviews with Angela Davis* (New York: Seven Stories, 2005), 95; Angela Davis, interview by Leonard Harris, Philosophy Born of Struggle conference, Purdue University, February 25, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6Mfgl-5dd4&feature=youtu.be>. For a different appreciation of Davis’s abolitionist political thought, see Eduardo Mendieta, “The Prison Contract and Surplus Punishment: On Angela Y. Davis’s Abolitionism,” *Human Studies* 30, no. 4 (2007): 291–309; Alex Zamalin, *Struggle on Their Minds: The Political Thought of African American Resistance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

40 Timothy McCarthy and John Stauffer, eds., *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New York: New Press, 2006).

41 Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, available at: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CDOC-11ohdoc50/pdf/CDOC-11ohdoc50.pdf>.

42 Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 3–29; Davis, “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System,” in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, ed. Bill Lawson and Frank Kirkland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 344.

43 Davis, *Meaning of Freedom*, 139.

those that had existed during slavery. The new Black Codes proscribed a range of actions—such as vagrancy, absence from work, breach of contracts, the possession of firearms, and insulting gestures or acts—that were criminalized only when the person charged was black. With the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, slavery and involuntary servitude were putatively abolished. However, there was a significant exception.<sup>44</sup>

The “duly convicted” clause of the Thirteenth Amendment functions as a constitutional clause of exception under the rule of law. It sanctions the perpetuation of the instruments of chattel slavery and the involuntary bondage of another so long as there is juridical justification for conviction and punishment of a criminal. It authorizes treating the incarcerated criminal as a slave.

The Thirteenth Amendment is a blessing and curse for what Saidiya Hartman calls the afterlife of slavery, Salamishah Tillet the sites of slavery, Judith Shklar the specter of slavery haunting postbellum America, Steven Hahn slave agency and revolt in an enslaving political order, Page duBois the perpetuation of reducing humans to objects, and David Brion Davis the problem of slavery in the age of black emancipation.<sup>45</sup> It marks a legislative victory for tempered antislavery supporters and a pyrrhic victory for abolitionists, who foresaw the mutations of slavery, biopolitics of violence, and continuation of white supremacy leading to Black Codes, gendered subjugation, routinization of lynching, appearance of convict lease, sharecropping, the breakdown of radical Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation should the comprehensive dismantling of the peculiar institution not occur.

As Angela Davis uncovers, by maintaining vestiges of the prison of slavery following 1865, the slavery of the prison and the death penalty came into being. The neoslave narratives of today’s fugitives and imprisoned intellectuals, self-referentially known as “the new abolitionists,” among them Assata Shakur and Mumia Abu-Jamal; the scale of contemporary global human trafficking; the stark militarization of American police forces over the last five decades, a phenomenon whose emergence coincides with the genesis of SWATs deployed in communities of color; the exponential expansion in the number of prisons over the last quarter century, filled disproportionately with black and brown bodies, at the same time

44 Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories, 2003), 28.

45 Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 21–23; Page duBois, *Slaves and Other Objects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6; Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014). Dan Berger’s assessment of Ava DuVernay’s recent film on the passage and afterlife of the Thirteenth Amendment is also instructive. See Berger, “Mass Incarceration and Mystification: A Review of *The 13th*,” *African American Intellectual History Society*, October 22, 2016, <http://www.aaihs.org/mass-incarceration-and-its-mystification-a-review-of-the-13th/>.

that massive cuts to public education and services have taken effect; the ongoing dehumanization of black life captured in powerful social media hashtags and Tumblrs such as #blacklivesmatter, #ICantBreathe, and #RhodesMustFall; the quotidian phenomenon of lethal gendered and racial violence against black youth represented by the events of Renisha McBride, Trayvon Martin, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Michael Brown, John Crawford III, Tamir Rice, and Philando Castile; the proliferation of states' rights arguments inherited from Confederate politicians John C. Calhoun and Jefferson Davis on the one hand and an equally pernicious contemporary discursive postracialism on the other; and Michelle Alexander's scathing indictment of mass incarceration—a late modern New Jim Crow, mirroring the Old Jim Crow and the formal period of New World slavery preceding it—lend credence to the rationale Davis develops for upholding an abolitionist philosophy fundamental to her scholar-activism.<sup>46</sup>

46 Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 2 vols. (Boston: Da Capo, 1990); John C. Calhoun, *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992); Margo Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); Joy James, ed., *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Michael Hames-Garcia, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Joy James, ed., *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Glenn Loury, *Race, Incarceration, and American Values* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press), 2010; Beth Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Radley Balko, *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013); Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, Essex, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013); Angela Davis, "From Michael Brown to Assata Shakur, The Racist State of America Persists," *Guardian*, November 1, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/01/michael-brown-assata-shakur-racist-state-of-america>; Robin Kelley, "Why We Won't Wait," *Counterpunch*, November 25, 2014, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/11/25/why-we-wont-wait/>; Andrew Dilts, *Punishment and Inclusion: Race, Membership, and the Limits of American Liberalism* (Fordham, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014); Kevin Gray, Jeffrey St. Clair, and JoAnne Wypijewski, eds., *Killing Trayvons: An Anthology of American Violence* (Petroia, ON: CounterPunch, 2014); Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2014); Sarah Tyson and Joshua Hall, eds., *Philosophy Imprisoned: The Love of Wisdom in an Age of Mass Incarceration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014); Geoffrey Adelsberg, Lisa Guenther, and Scott Zeman, eds., *Death and Other Penalties: Philosophy in a Time of Mass Incarceration* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2015); Dennis Childs, *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Marie Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Albert Dzur, Ian Loader, and Richard Sparks, eds., *Democratic Theory and Mass Incarceration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Marc Lamont Hill, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond* (New York: Atria, 2016); Neil Roberts, "It's Bigger than Hip Hop: Decoding the Trayvon Martin Event," in *Black and Male: Critical Voices from Behind the Racial Veil*, ed. George Yancy (Lexington, KY: Lexington Books, 2021).

## Democracy

The prison, more than the related but distinct politics of the death penalty, is Davis's unique area of philosophical reflection and abolitionist political involvement. In Davis's estimation, prisons are the exemplary spaces displaying the mutations of chattel slavery in our political present. Prisons harbor the new technologies of slavery. Prisons show the gendered facets of penality. Prisons are the thematic preoccupation in the lyrics of black blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. Prisons are undemocratic in their ordering. Prisons emphasize punishment rather than discipline, rehabilitation, or reform, an insight Michel Foucault learned from Davis instead of the other way around, when he advocated on her behalf through the Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons.<sup>47</sup> American prison inhabitants are, at the level of biopolitics, overwhelmingly persons of color, and within that demographic disproportionately black.

For all her laudatory words on Frederick Douglass, Davis trenchantly criticizes the philosophy of history enabling Douglass's failure, first, to critique the convict lease system throughout his career, and second, to pay attention to lynching until the last phase of his life.<sup>48</sup> Of the two issues, Ida B. Wells, feminist antiracist author of *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), was successful on challenging Douglass to address only the latter.<sup>49</sup> Douglass's "The Lynch Law in the South" (1892) and "Why Is the Negro Lynched?" (1894) resulted from Wells's lobbying. But as Davis admonishes, these late efforts weren't enough. "The convict lease system," Davis maintains, "carried over the relations of slave labor into the era of emancipation."<sup>50</sup> The magnitude of convict leasing would reach its zenith with the downfall of Reconstruction and it would be the basis of the subsequent rise of the modern panopticon prison structure. Justifications for the criminalization of black bodies and condemnation of blackness after Emancipation also have their roots in convict lease.<sup>51</sup>

While Davis notes W. E. B. Du Bois's brief commentary on convict leasing in an obscure missionary journal, an essay, like the writings of Mary Church Terrell, that fills in voids left by Douglass, it is Du Bois's study of the relationships among fugitive slaves, masters, the undemocratic slaveholding republic, and abolitionism that Davis builds upon in her own abolitionism.

47 In *Dreaming in French*, Kaplan (218) notes the impact of knowledge learned from Angela Davis on Michel Foucault's conceptualization of *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975).

48 Davis, "From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison," 399–62.

49 Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14975/14975-h/14975-h.htm>; Wells, *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader* (New York: Penguin, 2014). On Wells's political thought, see Paula Giddings, *Ida, a Sword among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign against Lynching* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008); Lawrie Balfour, "Ida B. Wells and 'Color Line Justice': Rethinking Reparations in Feminist Terms," *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 3 (2015): 680–96; Zamalin, *Struggle on Their Minds*.

50 Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 103.

51 Khalil Gibran Muhammad echoes Davis in *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Davis considers the slavery of prison both a key bulwark of the undemocratic life and an essential phenomenon that analysts should examine to decipher “the nature of democracy, or what goes under the rubric of democracy” in America.<sup>52</sup> In forming this outlook, she harks back to Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), a tome describing a Manichaean polity in the Reconstruction years spanning roughly 1865–77, a republic containing dually a *black world* and a *white world*. But Du Bois looks “back toward slavery”<sup>53</sup> repeatedly, juxtaposing the antebellum social and political order of the black and white worlds and America during and after Reconstruction in order to reconsider existing narratives about the agents thought to have caused the outbreak of Civil War, the fight over slavery’s future, and the struggle for democracy. “The true significance of slavery in the United States to the whole social development of America lay in the ultimate relation of slaves to democracy,” Du Bois writes. Furthermore, what “made the abolition movement terribly real was the Fugitive Slave—the piece of intelligent humanity who could say: I have been owned like an ox. I stole my own body and now I am hunted by law and lash to be made an ox again.”<sup>54</sup>

The fugitive slave experience of flight is one of trepidation and hope,<sup>55</sup> struggle an integral factor when engaging in the activity of exiting an undemocratic order and zone of nonbeing from a standpoint of liminality. Fugitives have dreams, visions, and aspirations, sometimes individualistic, other times collective; sometimes realized, at other moments merely a potentiality. The experiences of fugitives demonstrate in ways that complement and deepen Wolinian and Deleuzian accounts of both the precarious and promising elements of life in a democracy, real or imagined. These prime facets of fugitivity get lost when assessing another principle from *Black Reconstruction* revisited by Du Bois implicitly in *Color and Democracy* (1945) and often associated explicitly with Davis: *abolition-democracy*.<sup>56</sup>

Whereas inquiry into nineteenth-century fugitive slaves is backward looking, abolition-democracy has to do with the past, the present, and the future. Abolition-democracy involves imagining the means and methods through which a fractured American democratic project in need of reconstructing after a short-

52 Davis, *Meaning of Freedom*, 140.

53 Note, for instance, the title of chap. 16 in W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (orig. 1935; New York: Free Press, 1992): “Back toward Slavery.”

54 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 13, 20. Lawrie Balfour offers an insightful study of Du Bois on fugitivity in *Democracy’s Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For alternative readings of Du Bois’s abolitionism, consult George Lipsitz, “Abolition Democracy and Global Justice,” *Comparative American Studies* 2, no. 3 (2004): 271–86; Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Andrew Douglas, *W. E. B. Du Bois and the Critique of the Competitive Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019).

55 Andrew Delbanco underscores this point in *The War before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America’s Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2019).

56 Davis, *Abolition Democracy*, 77–103; Davis, *Meaning of Freedom*, 105–19.

lived Reconstruction can be sutured. Du Bois envisions two routes for a future postbellum America: one defined by rabid capitalism, private profit, wide income inequality, separation of the races, the maintaining of the structures of slavery, and a ruling elite, what contemporary activists in the Occupy Wall Street movement would classify as the fracturing of the demos through rule by the “1 percent” over the 99 percent<sup>57</sup>; and the second defined by a commitment to abolition-democracy, a notion of abolitionism that views any remnants of slavery as an inhibitor to democracy.<sup>58</sup> Abolish slavery and democracy can materialize. Let slavery persist and watch a *Herrenvolk* democracy either fail to appear or explode.

Davis’s brilliant, if controversial and illiberal, conclusion is that the entire late modern prison system must be abolished. She does not mean fix the prison system or reform the parameters of how the prison operates. All prisons must be made obsolete. Davis urges us to think of a world beyond carceral states, a world where a single standard is the norm: *decarceration*. The prison for her operates as the contemporary plantation and the prison-industrial complex the structural mechanism buttressing its exponentially expanding reach across the republic. The staggering increase of privatized prisons built over the last decade alone further exacerbates an already undemocratic system. Davis doesn’t deny that there are individuals within a society such as rapists, pedophiles, and murderers with willful intentionality to inflict temporary or permanent harm on others who should be held accountable. She does reject the position that prison in any constellation is a valuable site for those persons to confront and make restitution for their actions. To critics who question what options there are besides incarcerating as a consequence of violating the law, Davis retorts that there was a world without prisons before the modern period in which humans for millennia had to account for actions and responsibility, however objectionable. Abolitionist alternatives must be created to forge a democracy and allow for human beings within it to be free.<sup>59</sup>

At the level of institutional arrangements and design for a new social and political order, Davis implores us to consider options in an abolitionist order such as an increased emphasis on the building and restructuring of schools instead of prisons and jails; a healthcare system that enables the proper treatment of persons from poor and other disadvantaged communities experiencing emotional

57 Thomas Piketty, *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone, 2015); Lester Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* (New York: Punctum, 2015); Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

58 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 182–236. See also W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa and Color and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

59 Davis, *Abolition Democracy*, 96–97. The transnational work of Davis in black freedom struggles cultivates an emphasis on both actors and institutional arrangements in imagined new social and political orders that set Davis apart from many scholar-activists within the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory. Davis transfigures Marcusean politics by elucidating concrete blueprints for the realization of utopian possibilities.

and mental suffering without relying upon the hegemonic model of mental wards that themselves implement forms of punishment, especially psychological; the decriminalization of drug use and contemporary legal policies linked to the mass incarceration of individuals for nonviolent offenses; the fortification of a living wage; the decoupling of crime and punishment; and reparations for historical injustices.<sup>60</sup> Davis's involvement the last several decades with figures, organizations, and solidarity movements within postrevolutionary Cuba and postapartheid South Africa<sup>61</sup>—the latter notably in the period of transition to the Nelson Mandela administration after Mandela's release from prison and heated debates, as Drucilla Cornell notes, surrounding the integration of the philosophy of uBuntu<sup>62</sup> into South African jurisprudence<sup>63</sup>—demonstrates a commitment to these abolitionist precepts nationally and internationally. So too does Davis's work in and on Palestine, whether in conjunction with Palestinians surrounding boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) or US-based groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). "And if we say abolish the prison-industrial complex [in the United States], as we do," Davis remarks, "we should also say abolish apartheid, and end the occupation in Palestine!"<sup>64</sup>

One can discern here already a notion of democracy rooted in praxis and connected to a politics of freedom whose project strains against liberalism and much academic social and political theory precisely because of the nature of Davis's freedom agenda.

## Freedom

We are able now to understand why freedom is the second and final concept mediated by Davis's idea of abolitionism. In the opening to *Lectures on Liberation* (1969/71), Davis probes the following existential paradox:

The idea of freedom has justifiably been a dominating theme in the history of Western ideas. Man has been repeatedly defined in terms of his inalienable freedom. One

60 Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 105–15.

61 On September 9, 2016, Davis returned to South Africa to deliver the distinguished seventeenth annual Steve Biko Memorial lecture, named after the author of *I Write What I Like* and central progenitor of the South African black consciousness movement. A link to the full talk: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_8t\\_qxgDF2o&app=desktop](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8t_qxgDF2o&app=desktop).

62 The term *uBuntu* is a Southern African philosophy denoting shared kindness, virtue, and dignity among human beings.

63 On uBuntu and South African jurisprudence after the end of apartheid, see Drucilla Cornell and Nyoko Muvangua, eds., *uBuntu and the Law: African Ideals and Postapartheid Jurisprudence* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2011); Cornell, *Law and Revolution in South Africa: uBuntu, Dignity, and the Struggle for Constitutional Transformation* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014). Also instructive is Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South, or How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2012).

64 Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, 60.

of the most acute paradoxes present in the history of Western society is that while on a philosophical plane freedom has been delineated in the most lofty and sublime fashion, concrete reality has always been permeated with the most brutal forms of unfreedom, of enslavement. . . . Is man free or is he not? Ought he be free or ought not he be free? The history of Black literature provides, in my opinion, a much more illuminating account of the nature of freedom, its extent and limits, than all the philosophical discourses on this theme in the history of Western society.<sup>65</sup>

Davis delivered the lectures to inaugurate a course at UCLA titled “Recurring Philosophical Themes in Black Literature,” and the problematic this passage points to centers on debates about the foundations of the human. Through exegesis of the *Life and Times* (1881/92), Douglass’s last slave narrative, Davis pushes against the work of scholars in an existentialist tradition arguing for freedom as the foundational human condition. She writes: “Black people have exposed,” as Douglass documents, “by their very existence, the inadequacies not only of the practice of freedom, but of its very theoretical formulation.”<sup>66</sup> Davis reveals how the conundrum confounding philosophers of existence is not a paradox at all and is in actuality entirely explainable. The passage presages her concerted effort over several decades to define the meaning of freedom in relation to the experience of an originary enslavement. “Angela Davis is one of the few great long-distance intellectual freedom fighters in the world,” writes Cornel West.<sup>67</sup> And it is to the condition of the human at birth and the experience of freedom that Davis dedicates persistent attention. *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle* (2016), Davis’s latest book, utilizes contemporary examples to reinforce points illustrated in *Lectures*.

Davis believes entrenched traditions in Western political thought that portray unfreedom and freedom as static conditions and sovereignty as the primary aspiration of the free life are intellectually deficient. If enslavement is the originary human condition and ultimate unfreedom, then it is through flight that an agent extricates one’s self, thereby turning the so-called paradox on its head. *Resistance*, the product of an action or assemblage of actions, catalyzes radical change in an agent’s condition. Resistance to slavery, integral to a wider Great Refusal, has different modes of enactment. Open, physical resistance is one type of action auguring freedom for the slave. There is another sphere of resistance noted by Marcuse and Du Bois, yet given its distinct explication in transnational black feminist thought and Davis’s *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998) in particular: *the aesthetic dimension*.

Whereas Marcuse probes generally the radical potential of art and Du Bois the

65 Davis, *Lectures on Liberation*, 45, 46. In *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, Davis asks a similar question at the heart of the *Lectures* passage: “we must be free, we must be free. But are we really free?” (62, orig. emphasis).

66 Davis, *Lectures on Liberation*, 46.

67 Cornel West, foreword to Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, vii.



power of “Sorrow Songs,” the Negro spirituals, Davis limns the contributions of African American blues singers and jazz musicians, most notably Billie Holiday, to resistance and abolitionism. According to Davis, Lady Day’s rendition of the trenchant chant on lynching, “Strange Fruit,” expresses “hatred of racist-inspired brutality, with the rage of a potential community of resistance.”<sup>68</sup> The later utterances of jazz singers Abbey Lincoln and Nina Simone as well as, more recently, hip-hop musician Kanye West in “Blood on the Leaves” on *Yeezus* mark reverberations of Lady Day’s classic work, which Davis finds of enduring intellectual value. Moreover, 158 pages of *Black Legacies* are Davis’s original transcriptions of lyrics from 252 songs by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. The blues and jazz, as James Cone and Fred Moten observe, capture despair, suffering, protest, and hope, and they’re often forged in dark times.<sup>69</sup> They reflect, as Sylvia Wynter notes, a “new auto-poetics of cognition,”<sup>70</sup> a terrain of knowledge their songs augur to help bring into existence the free life and the new consciousness James Baldwin wrote of in his open letter to Davis.<sup>71</sup> But that’s not all. The blues and jazz are, in the estimation of Angela Davis, songs of freedom. She offers documentation of the entire work of Rainey and Smith along with the exegesis of “Strange Fruit” as a lyrical thought archive on aesthetics, intersectionality, and politics.

In addition to the examination of other figures and movements, Davis herself exemplifies how black fugitivity impacts the form and conveyance of ideas in the service of resistance. The way Davis composes sentences, the structure of her arguments, the strategic invocation of double entendres, and her mode of rhetoric in the delivery of public addresses demonstrate this. The aesthetic concerns the beautiful and the sublime, and assessments of it entail the rendering of judgments. Human judgment of the aesthetic contains elements that are objective and subjective, for, with regard to subjectivity, judgment involves the eyes of the beholder. The aesthetic dimension is irreducible to outward appearance. Inner and outer attributes of the human, coupled with metaphysics, constitute its core realms. And the aesthetic unlocks facets of the imagination pertinent to resistance and the political.

There is a beauty in resisting unfreedom, in spite of the arduous abolitionist politics often associated with it. Domination and the arbitrary interferences in the

68 Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 183. Consult as well Farah Jasmine Griffin’s *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Ballantine, 2001). Melvin Rogers also provides a perceptive interpretation of Billie Holiday’s rendition of “Strange Fruit.” For Rogers, in addition to freedom, this haunting song delves into the aesthetic dimension of democracy. See his essay “Race and the Democratic Aesthetic: Jefferson, Whitman, and Holiday on the Hopeful and the Horrific,” in *Radical Future Pasts: Untimely Political Theory*, ed. Romand Coles, Mark Reinhardt, and George Shulman (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 249–82.

69 James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Orbis, 1972); Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

70 Sylvia Wynter interview with *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics & Consciousness* 4 (2006): 33–4.

71 Baldwin, “Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Y. Davis.”

lives of subjugated agents cause intra- and intergenerational harms. Resistance is beautiful because it creates the possibility for dislodging these harmful dynamics of unfreedom through individual and collective strivings and acts. Think of people protesting en masse in cities and rural expanses alike; cries of dissatisfaction with life as is; expressions of dissent; solitary yearnings for a better world, a world where one is free and, ipso facto, conscious of one's capacity to take action. The rhetoric of social death and habitual mourning cannot explain this beauty, and the experience of it defies even the claims in our current moment between Afro-pessimists and black optimists.<sup>72</sup> The beauty of resisting is the sublime morality, mechanisms of change, multiple types of refusals, and political awakening that rejection of unfreedom affords. The aesthetics of resistance represents a central bulwark of postemancipation fugitive thinking within black freedom struggles and the black radical tradition.<sup>73</sup>

But the lessons of Douglass according to Davis stress another important site of resistance significant to freedom's attainment and connected to the aesthetic dimension: *the mind*.<sup>74</sup> Resistance makes possible the emancipatory release from one's chains. Flight, however, is more than what critical theorists call negative dialectics. As we've already begun to address, flight involves creation, refashioning, and building anew.

In a speech delivered on behalf of the Soledad Brothers, published on Septem-

72 For discussion of the Afro-pessimism—black optimism debate and its limitations, see Neil Roberts, "On Freedom and Radicalizing the Black Radical Tradition," *African American Intellectual History Society*, June 18, 2016, <http://www.aaihs.org/on-freedom-and-radicalizing-the-black-radical-tradition/>; Neil Roberts, "How to Live Free in an Age of Pessimism" (unpublished monograph).

73 On aesthetics and black radical thought, see Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes towards a Deciphering Practice," in *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 237–79; Clyde Taylor, *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract—Film and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995); Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Lewis Gordon, "Fanon's Decolonial Aesthetic," in Nikolas Kompridis, ed., *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 91–112; GerShun Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Jeremy Glick, *The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Paul Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016); Christopher Freeburg, *Black Aesthetics and the Interior Life* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017); Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

74 Davis, *Lectures on Liberation*, 51–52, 56.

ber 11, 1970 (a historical irony in hindsight, given the numerous claims at this juncture that our protagonist was a “terrorist”), in an issue of *Life* magazine featuring Davis on the cover with the caption “The Making of a Fugitive,” Davis contends, “Liberation is synonymous with revolution.” She states that a “revolution is not just armed struggle. It’s not just the period in which you can take over. A revolution has a very, very long spectrum.” Note that Davis distinguishes between the concepts of *freedom* and *liberation*, and she conceives of revolution—which is to be equated with liberation—as requiring the merging of the personal and political and the “building of a collective spirit.”<sup>75</sup> Davis’s freedom-liberation differentiation aligns with Hannah Arendt’s<sup>76</sup> solely in lexicon, as not only does Arendt conceive of liberation and freedom in their political valences to be separate projects, but she also contends that projects of liberation collapse into violence and terror, preventing the ossification of freedom and revolution.

Davis couldn’t disagree more. For Davis, as with Douglass, liberation and freedom, while distinct, are interconnected and liberation is integral to revolutionary politics. Flight in Davis’s system involves the processes of revolution wherein acts of the individual agent are inextricably linked to the activities of a mass. In *Lectures on Liberation*, Davis proposes “the crucial transformation of the concept of freedom as a static, given principle into the concept of liberation, the dynamic, active struggle for freedom.”<sup>77</sup> However, although this imperative shares Douglass’s belief in the difference between liberation and freedom, their interrelation notwithstanding, it mischaracterizes the political language of freedom Douglass develops.

Douglass, particularly in the second autobiography, *Bondage* (1855), devises a relational notion he refers to as *comparative freedom* where *liberation* is understood as tantamount to emancipation/independence and freedom an ideal state that is nevertheless subject to change. In an account radically revised from the description in his *Narrative* (1845) a decade earlier, Douglass asserts at the crescendo of the retelling of his famous fight with the slave-breaker Edward Covey, whose vocation Davis states is “to mutilate the humanity of the slave,”<sup>78</sup>:

I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be A FREEMAN. A man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot *honor* a helpless man, although it can *pity* him; and even this it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise. He can only understand the effect of this combat on my spirit, who has himself incurred

75 Angela Davis, speech on behalf of the Soledad Brothers, *Life* 69, no. 11 (September 11, 1970): 26, cited in James’s introduction to *Angela Y. Davis Reader*, 20.

76 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965).

77 Davis, *Lectures on Liberation*, 47.

78 Davis, *Lectures on Liberation*, 77.

something, hazarded something, in repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant. Covey was a tyrant, and a cowardly one, withal. After resisting him, I felt as I had never felt before. It was resurrection from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom.<sup>79</sup>

Douglass continues: “I had reached the point, at which I was *not afraid to die*. This spirit made me a freeman in *fact*, while I remained a slave in *form*. When a slave cannot be flogged he is more than half free.”<sup>80</sup> “Fact” here pertains to the spirit, mind, and cognitive domain and “form” to law and doctrines of jurisprudence. Douglass’s fight and struggle to resist Covey leads to a mutation in his condition. Douglass, like the aftereffects of Neo’s fight with Agent Smith in the subway platform in the film *The Matrix*, isn’t yet free under the rule of law and institutional framework. But the changes in his mind as a result of the physical encounter alter Douglass’s present sense of self and future outlook. He is able to imagine a future without the Coveys. Davis finds great theoretical value in Douglass’s experiences at the individual level, and there are corollary examples regarding collectivities. Lasting modes of constitutionalism following the alteration in one’s psychological disposition and the moment of physical release from one’s chains are, for Douglass, themselves another set of interconnected actions that contribute toward forging the condition of freedom.

Yet as has been already stated, Davis works with the thought of Douglass, Marcuse, Du Bois, Marxists, black feminists, and other influences *while* developing an abolitionist system that is not a mere replica. A critique of Douglass’s masculinist conception of freedom and equating of “freedom” with “manhood” along with already delineated areas of philosophical differentiation only becomes apparent to Davis decades after the UCLA lectures, once she establishes a framework to comprehend the gendered division of labor and intersections between gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality that inform our human condition.<sup>81</sup> What she

79 Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 180, 181, orig. emphasis. Unlike in the *Narrative*, Douglass adds throughout *Bondage* the adjective *comparative* in front of the word freedom (as well as before other key nouns) and the adverb *comparatively* in front of the adjective *free*. This is deliberate. Douglass makes additional crucial changes in similar passages within both the *Narrative* and *Bondage* I do not have space to describe here. I explain at length Douglass’s concept of comparative freedom and reconfiguration of the written account of his famous fight with Covey in *Freedom as Marronage*.

80 Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 181, orig. emphasis. I also describe more extensively Douglass’s distinction between “fact” and “form” in *Freedom as Marronage*.

81 Davis states in the introduction to the City Lights edition of Douglass’s *Narrative*: “One of the implications of the definition of ‘freedom’ in terms of ‘manhood’ is that the closest black women can come to freedom is to achieve the status not of a free man, but rather the unliberated status of the white woman. . . . In fact, today I find it simultaneously somewhat embarrassing to realize that my UCLA lectures on Douglass rely on an implicitly masculinist notion of freedom, and exciting to realize how much we have matured with respect to feminist analysis since that period” (25, 28).

distinctly details is the *unfinished* nature of liberation, that the act of liberation and the dynamic condition of freedom for which it provides the terms of appearance remain ongoing, continual processes.<sup>82</sup> In *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle* (2016) Davis remarks, in response to an interview question on whether struggle is endless, “I would say that as our struggles mature, they produce new ideas, new issues, and new terrain on which we engage in the quest for freedom.”<sup>83</sup> Elsewhere in the same text, Davis invokes apt verses from a song chanted widely during the twentieth-century black freedom movement: “*They say that freedom is a constant struggle . . . we’ve struggled so long / we’ve cried so long / we’ve sorrowed so long / we’ve moaned so long / we’ve died so long / we must be free, we must be free.*”<sup>84</sup> The final sentence of her address “Difficult Dialogues” (2012) also reaffirms what we may interpret as Davis’s account of perpetual flight: “We fight the same battles over and over again. They are never won for eternity, but in the process of struggling together, in community, we learn how to glimpse new possibilities that otherwise never would have become apparent to us, and in the process we expand and enlarge our very notion of freedom.”<sup>85</sup> By taking seriously the abolitionism of Davis and the charge to end slavery in all forms between past and future, we forever change not only our perceptions of utopian politics and the meanings of democracy and freedom. We rewrite the landscapes of African American political thought and modern political thought as a whole.

In the Age of Trump, Angela Y. Davis’s insights into the human condition have an unprecedented urgency. We would do well to heed her words.

82 A significantly abridged version of *Lectures on Liberation* was published in Leonard Harris’s 1983 anthology *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917* under the title “Unfinished Lecture on Liberation—II.” This latter incomplete text was the primary source of reference for Davis’s idea of freedom until recently. Its title, though, properly captures Davis’s sense of liberation as being perpetually unfinished.

83 Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, 11.

84 Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, 61.

85 Davis, *Meaning of Freedom*, 198.

## 29: Clarence Thomas

### Race Pessimism and Black Capitalism

Corey Robin

Clarence Thomas is the longest-serving justice on the current US Supreme Court. Should he remain on the court another eight years—in 2020 he turned seventy-two—he will be the longest-serving justice in American history. He is the author of more than seven hundred opinions, averaging in the last decade thirty-four opinions per year, often the most of any justice.<sup>1</sup> He has pioneered radical transformations in constitutional law, taking heterodox positions in dissent, on issues as various as campaign finance and the right to bear arms, that eventually become the opinion of the court.<sup>2</sup> Thomas's opinions on the Commerce Clause used to be considered so extreme they failed to garner a single vote from his colleagues. Now they are debated in the nation's top law schools.<sup>3</sup> His long-standing willingness to question settled precedent has begun to attract not only the support of fellow conservatives on the court but also the attention of seasoned court watchers in the media.<sup>4</sup>

Outside the legal academy, however, where the literature on Thomas is extensive (though focused on narrow questions of doctrine and method), most people know little about Thomas and even less about his thinking and jurisprudence. When it comes to scholarly discussions of American thought, judges and justices often play a peripheral role, and it's only recently that modern conservatism has become a topic of academic inquiry. Even so, it is surprising how infrequently Thomas's writing appears in anthologies, syllabi, and other conversations about

1 LexisNexis search (December 2018); "The Statistics," *Harvard Law Review* 127 (2013): 408; "The Statistics," *Harvard Law Review* 128 (2014): 401; "The Statistics," *Harvard Law Review* 129 (2015): 381; "The Statistics," *Harvard Law Review* 130 (2016): 507; "The Statistics," *Harvard Law Review* 131 (2017): 403; "The Statistics," *Harvard Law Review* 132 (2018): 447. *Law Review* statistics do not include opinions related to Supreme Court orders.

2 *Printz v. United States*, 521 US 898, 938 (1997) (concurring); Jeffrey Toobin, *The Oath: The Obama White House and the Supreme Court* (New York: Anchor, 2012–13), 243–44; Ralph A. Rossum, *Understanding Clarence Thomas: The Jurisprudence of Constitutional Restoration* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 109; Steven B. Lichtman, "Black like Me: The Free Speech Jurisprudence of Clarence Thomas," *Penn State Law Review* 114 (Fall 2009): 431–437.

3 Emma Green, "The Clarence Thomas Effect," *Atlantic*, July 10, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/07/clarence-thomas-trump/593596/>.

4 Adam Liptak, "That's a Settled Precedent? Thomas Disagrees," *New York Times*, March 5, 2019, A13.

American political and social thought. This is doubly surprising, for of all the justices on the current court, Thomas arguably has the greatest claim on the attention of political and social theorists. Not simply because of his influence but also because Thomas, uniquely on the court, uses his jurisprudence to advance a set of claims about the American experience that speak directly to the interests and concerns of scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

Thomas's jurisprudence is rooted in two formative moments: his early years, from roughly 1968 to 1974, as a black nationalist on the Left; and his move to the Right in the mid-1970s. Far from requiring him to abandon his black nationalism, Thomas's right turn was built on and incorporated elements of that black nationalism. The result is an abiding pessimism about race—not only a belief in the ontology of racism and the impossibility of overcoming it but also a belief that racism is peculiarly embedded in politics and the state—and a concomitant claim that a capitalist economy is where African Americans will find the resources, economic and cultural, that they need to survive as a people.

That combination of commitments, to racial pessimism and black capitalism, makes Thomas's a distinctive voice in contemporary debates. Unlike virtually all white conservatives and a fair number of conservatives of color, Thomas does not believe in colorblindness as a description or ideal.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, while Thomas shares some assumptions with Afro-pessimists of the Left about race, politics, and the state, he parts company with them over capitalism. Thomas is not a bootstrapping individualist who believes in personal uplift or the efficiencies of the market. Instead he believes that the market offers African Americans as a community, particularly African American men in the community, spaces and niches to accumulate wealth and standing. Those spaces and that standing afford African Americans the nurture and protection Thomas believes his grandfather, a successful small businessman in Savannah, secured for him and his brother, as well as the larger black Savannah community, under Jim Crow. In this synthesis of racial pessimism and black capitalism, Thomas reprises a move not uncommon among black nationalists of the 1970s, who were far more willing to experiment with capitalism than is commonly supposed.<sup>6</sup>

5 John McWhorter, "Racism in America Is Over," *Forbes*, December 30, 2008, [https://www.forbes.com/2008/12/30/end-of-racism-oped-cxjm\\_1230mcwhorter.html](https://www.forbes.com/2008/12/30/end-of-racism-oped-cxjm_1230mcwhorter.html); Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York: Free Press, 1995); James J. Heckman, "Detecting Discrimination," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 12 (Spring 1998): 101–16; Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith, "'Without Regard to Race': Critical Ideational Development in Modern American Politics," *Journal of Politics* 76 (July 2014): 958–71; Leah Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 309–10; Andrea Simpson, *The Tie That Binds: Identity and Political Attitudes in the Post-Civil Rights Generation* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 4.

6 Laura Warren Hill and Julia Rabig, eds., *The Business of Black Power: Community Development, Capitalism, and Corporate Responsibility in Postwar America* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2012); David Goldberg et al., eds., *Black Power at Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010);

The dialogue between black conservatism and black nationalism is well known to scholars. Issuing “a challenge to those who have viewed black nationalism as if it were invariably a leftist movement,” Wilson Moses famously claimed that during “the Golden Age of Black Nationalism,” from the 1850s through the 1920s, “the ideology was conservative rather than radical.”<sup>7</sup> Scholars of African American politics and political thought have usefully examined, in multiple contexts, the overlap between black conservatism and black nationalism, exploring the conservative dimensions of the latter and the black nationalist dimensions of the former.<sup>8</sup> Thomas is unique, however, in bringing this synthesis of the two traditions to the court. Not only does that give Thomas a particular stature in the American pantheon, but it also differentiates his thinking from other conjunctures of black nationalism and black conservatism. Constrained as it is by the discipline of legal argument and reasoning—justices are political actors, but theirs is an especially mannered mode of action—Thomas’s jurisprudence shows us what a synthesis of black nationalism and black conservatism looks like when it is channeled into the norms and forms of the Constitution, what it sounds like when it is translated into that most traditional and stylized genre of the American canon: the Supreme Court opinion. It also gives us a glimpse of what such a vision of race pessimism and black capitalism might look like should it ever come to power.

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Clarence Thomas was born in 1948 in Pin Point, Georgia, a poor black community not far from the Atlantic coast that was founded by freed slaves after the Civil War. Six years later, his mother Leola moved Clarence and his two siblings to Savannah. Unable to provide for her children, Leola placed Clarence and his brother with her father, and their sister with Leola’s aunt. It was in Savannah that Thomas says he first came into direct contact with the color line, not at the hands of whites

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Robert Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1971, 1990), 17–19, 21–22, 48, 153–56, 158–64, 182–92, 216–45; Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), 427–43; Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 73, 77, 79, 94; Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 57–68.

7 Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 11.

8 Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 71–78, 103–7; Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 87, 89, 92–93, 100–122, 130, 282; Peter Eisenstadt, ed., *Black Conservatism: Essays in Intellectual and Political History* (New York: Garland, 1999); xiv, xviii–xix; Rigueur, *Loneliness of the Black Republican*, 68, 89, 124; Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, 125–27, 133–34; Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, 18, 68, 153–56, 158–64, 182–92, 216, 245; Simpson, *Tie That Binds*.



but of blacks. With his dark skin and a Gullah-Geechee dialect he retained from Pin Point, Thomas was a caste within a caste, an easy target in school and on the street. “Clarence had big lips, nappy hair, and he was almost literally black,” says one classmate. “Those folks were at the bottom of the pole.” Other kids called him “ABC”—America’s Blackest Child—and teased him that “if he were any blacker he’d be blue.” Color was code for class. Even though Thomas’s grandfather was materially better off than many African Americans in the community, Thomas remembers a childhood where black wealth and light skin looked down upon black poverty and dark skin. “You had the black elite, the schoolteachers, the light-skinned people, the dentists, the doctors. My grandfather was down at the bottom.” That and similar memories would serve as a touchstone of Thomas’s later contempt for black liberalism, which he associates with the light-skin privilege of the black professional class.<sup>9</sup>

In 1968 Thomas enrolled as a sophomore at Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, not far from Boston. He was one of nineteen black men recruited to integrate the college, which was as racist as it was white. In a survey, a quarter to a half of Thomas’s classmates agreed with the propositions that blacks “have less ambition” and “looser morals” than whites and that they “smell different.” The summer before his arrival, the college contacted incoming white students to see if they would object to having a black roommate; black students were never asked if they objected to a white roommate. Thomas had experienced racism in the South, particularly at the Catholic boarding school he attended before he left for college, where his white classmates would taunt him after lights out that they couldn’t see him in the dark. But the two-step of his undergraduate years, where he was welcomed with one hand and rebuffed with the other, came to seem emblematic of the deceptions of northern white liberalism. When Boston exploded in violence over busing in the mid-1970s, Thomas wasn’t surprised. “I’d already found New England to be far less honest about race than the South, and I bristled at the self-righteous sanctimony with which so many of the northerners at Yale [where he would attend law school] glibly discussed the South’s racial problems.”<sup>10</sup>

In the North, Thomas also came into contact with the black nationalism that would have such an influence on his development. One of “Malcolm’s children”—

9 Jane Mayer and Jill Abramson, *Strange Justice: The Selling of Clarence Thomas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 45; Ken Foskett, *Judging Thomas: The Life and Times of Clarence Thomas* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), 59–62, 111; Kevin Merida and Michael A. Fletcher, *Supreme Discomfort: The Divided Soul of Clarence Thomas* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 49; Clarence Thomas, *My Grandfather’s Son: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 29–30; Juan Williams, “A Question of Fairness,” *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1, 1987, 74; Corey Robin, *The Enigma of Clarence Thomas* (New York: Metropolitan, 2019), 20–23.

10 Thomas, *My Grandfather’s Son*, 35–36, 78; Diane Brady, *Fraternity* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2012), 24, 59; Andrew Peyton, *Clarence Thomas: A Biography* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2001), 85, 89–90, 114; Merida and Fletcher, *Supreme Discomfort*, 96–98, 104, 107; Mayer and Abramson, *Strange Justice*, 49; Foskett, *Judging Thomas*, 70, 74–75, 79–80; Robin, *Enigma*, 23–25.

that generation of black students who took inspiration from Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and Black Power—Thomas threw himself into a whirl of activism on campus and in Worcester. He and his friends organized the Black Student Union. Their founding statement offered a rousing affirmation of black solidarity: “We, the Black students of the College of the Holy Cross, in recognizing the necessity for strengthening a sense of racial identity and group solidarity, being aware of a common cause with other oppressed peoples, and desiring to expose and eradicate social inequities and injustices, do hereby establish the Black Students Union of Holy Cross.” Thomas typed up the document and was elected secretary-treasurer. He read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and collected records of his speeches, which he could still recite from memory decades later. He championed the cause of Kathleen Cleaver and Angela Davis. His first trip to Washington, DC, was to march on the Pentagon in protest of the Vietnam War. The last rally he attended was to free Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins. Thomas’s commitment was not merely rhetorical or theoretical. By all accounts, he played an active role in organizing black students and working with local black communities. His friends enjoyed teasing him about the fervor of his dedication and the seriousness of his study: “What woman would want this man anyway?” they’d ask. He’s “into books and Black Power.” But as a Supreme Court justice looking back on his youth, Thomas refused to mock the moment. “I was an angry black man,” he wrote in his 2008 memoir. “The more I read about the black power movement, the more I wanted to be a part of it.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1971 Thomas enrolled in Yale Law School. The beneficiary of an affirmative action program, he was subjected to snobbery and suspicion from his white professors and white peers. “You had to prove yourself every day because the presumption was that you were dumb and didn’t deserve to be there on merit.” Having to demonstrate his talents to skeptical if not hostile white audiences was not a new experience for Thomas. Because southern racism was so overt, however, he had felt confident in the South that his achievements belonged to him and the black community. With scrutiny and hostility now coming from liberal whites acting as his patrons and protectors, ready to remind him at every turn that his achievements were also theirs, he felt his accomplishments divested of their authority. “As much as it had stung to be told I’d done well in [high school] despite my race,” he said, “it was far worse to feel that I was now at Yale because of it.”<sup>12</sup>

Upon graduating from law school in 1974, Thomas moved to Missouri, where he went to work in the office of the state’s attorney general, Republican John Danforth. The reasons for Thomas’s decision were complex, involving considerations of family (Thomas was married with a child), money, and career. But working for a Republican in a public sector job in the lower Midwest cannot be chalked up

<sup>11</sup> Robin, *Enigma*, 26–33.

<sup>12</sup> Robin, *Enigma*, 33–34.

to simple calculations of self-interest. There were, after all, more lucrative and direct paths to selling out. (Indeed, in the late 1970s Thomas worked briefly as a corporate lawyer with Monsanto, only to quit within less than two years for the less remunerative world of the public sector.)<sup>13</sup> More important was Thomas's growing disillusionment with liberalism and the Left.

That disillusionment had multiple components, but two stand out. The first was a belief that racism was so deeply rooted—after he joined the Supreme Court, Thomas would say that racism had “complex and, to a certain degree, undiscoverable roots”—as to be irremovable. Speaking to a group of black college students in 1985, Thomas declared, “I am here to say that discrimination, racism, and bigotry have gone no place and probably never will.” This was not a claim that Thomas reserved for black audiences. Two years later—and just four years before his appointment to the Supreme Court—Thomas told the *Atlantic Monthly*: “There is nothing you can do to get past black skin. I don’t care how educated you are, how good you are—you’ll never have the same contacts or opportunities, you’ll never be seen as equal to whites.”<sup>14</sup> These were just two of many instances where Thomas made clear his belief in not only the persistence but also the intractability of racism.<sup>15</sup>

Whites were racists. The only question was whether they were honest about it. As Thomas said of the leadership of his own party and colleagues in the Reagan administration: “Yes, there are a lot of racists in the Administration. So what? There may be more here now, they may be more out front. I don’t care. I prefer dealing with an out-and-out racist anyway to one who is racist behind your back.”<sup>16</sup> Here he echoed a long-standing preference, shared by everyone from

13 Foskett, *Judging Thomas*, 149; Peyton, *Clarence Thomas*, 175; Thomas, *My Grandfather's Son*, 116–17.

14 Thomas, “The New Intolerance,” Law Day Address, Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University, May 1993, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/clarence-thomas-the-new-intolerance.htm>; Thomas, Savannah State College Commencement Address (June 9, 1985), in Thomas, *Confronting the Future: Selections from the Senate Confirmation Hearings and Prior Speeches* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1992), 37; Williams, “Question of Fairness,” 72.

15 William Raspberry, “Are the Problems of Blacks Too Big for Government to Solve?,” *Washington Post*, July 17, 1983, C3; Clarence Thomas, “Black America under the Reagan Administration,” *Policy Review*, Fall 1985, 34, 41; Bill Kauffman, “Clarence Thomas,” *Reason*, November 1987, 33; Thomas, *My Grandfather's Son*, 163.

16 Williams, “Question of Fairness,” 80. Also see Thomas, *My Grandfather's Son*, 75–76, 108; Mayer and Abramson, *Strange Justice*, 78–79; Kim Masters, “EEOC's Thomas: Ready to Sing a Different Tune?,” *Legal Times*, December 24/31, 1984, 2; Kauffman, “Clarence Thomas,” 33; Thomas, speech to the Heritage Foundation (June 18, 1987), reprinted as “Why Black Americans Should Look to Conservative Policies,” *Human Events*, July 27, 1991, 12; Thomas, speech to Pacific Research Institute, San Francisco (August 10, 1987), in *Hearings before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 102nd Cong., 1st sess.*, September 10, 11, 12, 13, 17, 19, 20, 1991, and October 11, 12, 13, 1991, pt. 1, 158; Thomas, “No Room at the Inn: The Loneliness of the Black Conservative,” in *Black and Right: The Bold New Voice of Black Conservatives in America*, ed. Stan Faryna, Brad Stetson, and Joseph G. Contti (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 5, 8–9, 12; Thomas, “Black Amer-

Marcus Garvey to Malcolm X, for white racial candor over duplicitous professions of racial equality. As Garvey said of the Ku Klux Klan: "They are better friends to my race for telling us what they are, and what they mean, than all the hypocrites put together with their false gods and religions, notwithstanding. I like honesty and fair play."<sup>17</sup>

In the face of the persistence and pervasiveness of racism, Thomas concluded that the freedom struggle in all its phases—from the civil rights movement to the Panthers to the Gary Convention—was a fool's errand. Any political expression of black solidarity, whether electoral or movement based, revolutionary or reformist, was doomed to failure.<sup>18</sup> Though Thomas came to loathe the black Left, it was less the adventurism he disliked than the failure of black politics as such, the failure of everyone, from mainstream liberals to ultra-leftists, to change things, and the dawning recognition that the kind of political power that would be required to change things was vastly more than African Americans could muster.<sup>19</sup>

The problem was twofold. On the one hand, the legacy of racism was so deeply sown into society as to make it immune to state action. Law and regulation "cannot correct for all those years" of white supremacy, Thomas argued, from slavery to Jim Crow. "We're kidding ourselves if we think it can."<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, African Americans were a vulnerable and despised minority, with few political tools at their disposal. Any political action, particularly action directed at the state, would founder upon the fact that the state was the domain of whites, that the public sphere was a white sphere. "Blacks are the least favored group in this society. Suppose we did band together, group against group—which group do you think would win? We're breaking down everything, ten percent for the blacks, twenty-five percent for the women, two percent for the aged, everything broken out according to groups. Which group always winds up with the least? Which group always seems to get the hell kicked out of it? Blacks, and maybe American Indians."<sup>21</sup>

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ica under the Reagan Administration," 35–36; Thomas, letter to the editor, *New Republic*, March 7, 1988), 2, 41; Thomas, "Republicans Can Win Black Votes," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, March 7, 1987, 4; Merida and Fletcher, *Supreme Discomfort*, 162; Mayer and Abramson, *Strange Justice*, 78; Thomas, *My Grandfather's Son*, 146–47, 179; Peyton, *Clarence Thomas*, 202, 293–94; Foskett, *Judging Thomas*, 197–98.

17 Cited in Robinson, *Black Nationalism*, 31. Also see Malcolm X, "God's Judgment of White America," in *The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches by Malcolm X*, ed. Imam Benjamin Karim (New York: Arcade, 1971), 137.

18 Juan Williams, "Black Conservatives, Center Stage," *Washington Post*, December 16, 1980, A21; Thomas, "No Room at the Inn," 7.

19 Peyton, *Clarence Thomas*, 173–74.

20 Raspberry, "Are the Problems of Blacks Too Big for Government to Solve?," C3. Also see Thomas, "Black America under the Reagan Administration," 33; Williams, "Question of Fairness," 79; Timothy M. Phelps and Helen Winternitz, *Capitol Games: The Inside Story of Clarence Thomas, Anita Hill, and a Supreme Court Nomination* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 87–88.

21 Williams, "Question of Fairness," 79.

A similar sense of the failure of integration and mainstream black politics once drew Thomas to the black nationalist Left. In the wake of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, he, like many other African Americans who turned to Black Power and the Panthers after 1968, believed that “no one was going to take care of me or any other black person in America.”<sup>22</sup> Now that very same belief was propelling a headlong flight not simply from the Left but from the very idea of political action.

These beliefs—in the persistence and pervasiveness of racism, in the futility of black political action, in the intertwining of race and state—not only induced a disaffection with the Left; they also accompanied and structured Thomas’s turn to the Right. Not long after joining Danforth’s office in Missouri, Thomas became increasingly active in black conservative circles, with economist Thomas Sowell providing a formative influence.<sup>23</sup> By 1980 Thomas’s right turn was complete. After the election of Ronald Reagan, Thomas joined the administration, first as assistant secretary of education and then as chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In 1989 he was appointed by Reagan’s successor, George H. W. Bush, to the United States Court of Appeals. One year later, amid much controversy over allegations that he had sexually harassed Anita Hill, he was appointed to the Supreme Court.

It may seem difficult if not impossible to reconcile Thomas’s belief in the perversity and futility of black political action with a political career on the Right, particularly as Thomas has claimed that career on behalf of a specifically black conservatism that he believes will serve the interests of African Americans.<sup>24</sup> Yet that conflict is hardly peculiar to Thomas. It is a quandary familiar to many conservatives, who affirm a generic opposition to political action and the state while dedicating their lives to political action and the state, and to black conservatives who believe that the only way to persuade African Americans to give up their allegiance to liberalism and the Democratic Party is to proffer an actually existing political alternative.<sup>25</sup>

More important, it was only in the conservative movement that Thomas believed he could find a force ready to enact the conditions necessary to black survival. Only in the Republican Party was there a dispensation to get the state out of what Thomas saw as the poisonous business of black emancipation. Only the

22 Thomas, *My Grandfather’s Son*, 46; Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 159.

23 Robin, *Enigma*, 83–86.

24 Thomas, Heritage Foundation speech, 12, 17; Clarence Thomas, “‘We Are Going to Enforce the Law!’ Interview with Clarence Thomas, Chairman, EEOC,” by Chester A. Higgins, *Crisis*, February 1983, 50; Thomas, “Black America under the Reagan Administration,” 35; Peyton, *Clarence Thomas*, 173.

25 Angela D. Dillard, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner Now? Multicultural Conservatism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 15; Rigueur, *Loneliness of the Black Republican*, 124–25.

Republican Party was ready to impose the exigency and adversity that Thomas believed would force African Americans to return to the hard-won wisdom of their elders, a wisdom forged under slavery and Jim Crow, a wisdom that enabled African Americans to survive centuries of white supremacy. The way forward, said Thomas, “is the road—the old fashioned road—travelled by those who endured slavery—who endured Jim Crowism,” the road of those who “refused to accept” their social death “as inevitable.” Black people didn’t overcome—that was not, and is not, the vision of Clarence Thomas. The miracle of black people is that they “endured—they survived.” Their descendants should no longer “ignore what has permitted Blacks in this country to survive the brutality of slavery and the bitter rejection of segregation.” Those descendants should instead “learn the values which made their [ancestors’] survival possible.”<sup>26</sup> Retrieving the wisdom embedded in those older social conditions, perhaps even recreating elements of those older social conditions, might enable the descendants to survive and endure once again.

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On the Supreme Court, Thomas has consistently argued that racism is a persistent and pervasive feature of American life. “Conscious and unconscious prejudice persists in our society,” wrote Thomas in *Georgia v. McCollum*. “Common sense and common experience confirm this understanding.” A decade later, he was still reaffirming that common sense: “If society cannot end racial discrimination, at least it can arm minorities with the education to defend themselves from some of discrimination’s effects.” That “if” flies by so quickly we may not notice what Thomas is doing: rather than setting up a conditional about American society, he sets out the inability to end racial discrimination as *the* condition of American society. Thomas made a similar move in the desegregation case *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle*, averring that if we accept race-conscious government measures today, we must accept them forever because the racial conflicts they are meant to address will never go away. So bleak is Thomas’s vision of racial progress that he believes black people—though Thomas will sometimes speak of “minorities” or other people of color, it’s quite clear that he almost always has African Americans in mind—can only defend themselves against *some* of discrimination’s effects.<sup>27</sup>

A corollary of Thomas’s belief in the persistence of racism is his disinclination to rely upon or resort to colorblindness as a description or even ideal of American

26 Thomas, “Freedom: A Responsibility, Not a Right,” *Ohio Northern University Law Review* 21 (1994): 4; Thomas, Savannah State Address, 33, 35, 39.

27 *Georgia v. McCollum*, 505 US 42, 61 (1992) (concurring); *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 536 US 639, 683 (2002) (concurring); *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 551 US 701, 767–768 (2007) (concurring). Also see Thomas, “New Intolerance”; Robin, *Enigma*, 44–45.

society. As early as 1983, while working in the Reagan administration, Thomas was criticizing conservatives and Republicans for the “hypocrisy and irony of” their “repeated calls for color-blind legal remedies in a country which has tolerated color-conscious violations of the law for so much of its history.” Several years later, he began experimenting with the rhetoric of a colorblind Constitution. He never stopped insisting, however, that such a vision should not be confused or conflated with a colorblind society. As he wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, “A society cannot be colorblind, any more than men and women can escape their bodies.” Thomas affirmed that belief in the impossibility of a colorblind society in other venues and at his Senate confirmation hearings.<sup>28</sup>

On the court, the phrase “color-blind Constitution” appears in only a handful of Thomas’s more than seven hundred opinions—and in one of those, Thomas is careful to point out that such a Constitution “does not bar the government from taking measures to remedy past state-sponsored discrimination.” A colorblind Constitution, in other words, allows for race-conscious measures; one of those measures, Thomas adds, is the Fourteenth Amendment itself, which sought “to bring former slaves into American society as full members.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed Thomas has supported race-conscious measures of state, not, to be sure, in support of liberal policy positions but nevertheless in defiance of the colorblind ideal.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Thomas’s opposition to affirmative action—one of the domains of conservative jurisprudence where the ideal of colorblindness is most frequently found—is not grounded in any such ideal. Not long before he ascended to the Supreme Court, Thomas claimed that the argument from colorblindness had “been over-used by opponents of affirmative action.”<sup>31</sup> For that reason, his opinions against affirmative action rely on two different claims: affirmative action depends upon assumptions of racial paternalism similar if not identical to those that propped up slavery and Jim Crow, and it reinforces preexisting stigmas of black inferiority.<sup>32</sup>

28 Ronald Suresh Roberts, *Clarence Thomas and the Tough Love Crowd: Counterfeit Heroes and Unhappy Truths* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 121; Clarence Thomas, “The Black Experience: Rage and Reality,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 1987, 18; Clarence Thomas, “Thomas Sowell and the Heritage of Lincoln,” *Lincoln Review*, Spring 1988, 7, 9, 11; *Senate Confirmation Hearings*, pt. 1, 250.

29 *Holder v. Hall*, 512 US 874, 906 (1994) (concurring); *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 551 US 701, 748, 772n19, 780–81 (2007) (concurring); *Fisher v. University of Texas*, 570 US 297, 325, 327 (2013) (concurring); *Alabama Legislative Black Caucus v. Alabama*, 135 S. Ct. 1257, 1284, 1288 (2015) (dissenting); *Bethune-Hill v. Virginia State Board of Elections*, 137 S. Ct. 788, 807 (2017) (concurring in part and dissenting in part).

30 *Georgia v. McCollum*, 505 US 42, 48–49, 58–59, 60–61 (1992) (concurring); *United States v. Fordice*, 505 US 717, 745 (1992) (concurring); *Johnson v. California*, 543 US 499, 524, 526, 527, 532, 535, 545 (2005) (dissenting).

31 Clarence Thomas, “The Higher Law Background of the Privileges or Immunities Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 12 (1989): 66.

32 *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña*, 515 US 200, 240 (1995) (concurring); *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 US 306, 349 (2003) (concurring in part and dissenting in part); *Fisher v. University of Texas*, 570 US 229, 315 (2013) (concurring); Robin, *Enigma*, 62–73.

This argument from stigma is another distinguishing element of Thomas's jurisprudence on race.<sup>33</sup> While much of the conservative jurisprudence on race focuses on questions of intentional prejudice and legal formalism—either the consciously expressed bias of individual actors or explicit mentions of race in matters of law and policy—Thomas's argument from stigma does not depend upon evidence of intentional or conscious bias or a view of racism as personal animus. Social stigmas exist independently of the intentions of individual actors, and to the extent that they depend upon those actors, they often work at the level of unconscious biases.

For Thomas, race has a social rather than individual existence; it lives in the world. The stigma of race associates blackness with inferiority or second-rateness. "It never ceases to amaze me," Thomas wrote in a 1995 opinion, "that the courts are so willing to assume that any thing that is predominantly black must be inferior."<sup>34</sup> Racial stigmas are notations of skin color that register a deficit, sometimes of character or morality, but more often of skill, talent, or intellect. It does not matter if the purpose of the notation is to overcome the deficit. The mere fact of the notation will reinforce a preexisting view among whites of black inferiority. Thomas willingly concedes that programs like affirmative action do not *create* that white view of black inferiority; indeed he points to other programs of assistance, such as legacy admissions, that function just like affirmative action yet do not create or contribute to the belief that children of alumni are inherently deficient. The reason affirmative action is different, Thomas believes, is that it is built on an already existing view of black inferiority.<sup>35</sup> Only for African Americans is the fact of being singled out for help taken—here Thomas borrows directly from the language of *Plessy v. Ferguson*—as "a badge of inferiority."<sup>36</sup> It doesn't matter if some African Americans succeed without help. The stigma of deficiency taints them and their achievements too.<sup>37</sup> In the same way that the enslavement of black people marked all black people, whether free or slave, as inferior, so does the stigma of help mark all African Americans—whether they have been helped or not—with the badge of inferiority.

Racial stigmas need not be expressed explicitly. Thomas often finds racist notions less in formal propositions and statements than in deeper layers of unconscious sentiment. To spot that sentiment, one must look to the gaps in an argument and understand that that argument makes sense only if one assumes

33 For an excellent discussion of the role of racial stigma in Thomas's thinking, see Tomiko Brown-Nagin, "The Transformational Politics of Justice Thomas: The *Grutter v. Bollinger* Opinion," *Journal of Constitutional Law* 7 (February 2005): 787–807.

34 *Missouri v. Jenkins*, 515 US 70, 114 (1995) (concurring).

35 *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 US 306, 367–68 (2003) (concurring in part and dissenting in part).

36 *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña*, 515 US 200, 241 (1995) (concurring); *Fisher v. University of Texas*, 570 US 297, 333 (2013) (concurring).

37 *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 US 306, 373 (2003) (concurring in part and dissenting in part). Also see *Fisher v. University of Texas*, 515 US 297, 334 (2013) (concurring).



a connective tissue of racial assumption. When a lower court finds that “racial isolation” in schools is, by its very nature, a constitutional injury to black children, Thomas claims the court is guilty of unconscious bias: “If separation itself is a harm, and if integration therefore is the only way that blacks can receive a proper education, then there must be something inferior about blacks.”<sup>38</sup> Here Thomas echoes some of the claims of Carmichael and Hamilton in *Black Power*—integration “reinforces, among both black and white, the idea that ‘white’ is automatically superior and ‘black’ is by definition inferior”—and the Gary Convention, where delegates from South Carolina proposed that busing was “based on the false notion that Black children are unable to learn unless they are in the same setting as white children.”<sup>39</sup>

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Marcus Garvey argued that a black person should never “depend on the ballot” or “resort to the government for protection.” The government will always “be in the hands of the majority of the people who are prejudiced against him.”<sup>40</sup> Thomas’s jurisprudence of voting rights, disparate impact, and the Takings Clause, which puts restrictions on the government’s ability to take private property for public use, reflects a similar belief that any attempt by African Americans to alter their situation via politics or the state is doomed to failure. African Americans should stop looking to electoral politics as a means of bettering their condition; any involvement in the electoral sphere will only confirm white power and reinforce black powerlessness. Not only is the state unable to improve black conditions; it will actively make those conditions worse.

In his most important voting rights opinion to date, *Holder v. Hall*, Thomas offers an extended analysis of black electoral agency, what he variously calls the “voting strength,” “fully ‘effective’ voting strength,” “undiluted . . . voting strength,” “voting power,” “undiluted voting power,” “effective voting power,” “group voting power,” and “electoral success” of African Americans—African Americans conceived, that is, not as individuals or a community but as a politicized collective.<sup>41</sup> While scholars of voting rights and black politics often debate whether the aim of the black vote should be what Thomas calls “*control* over a lesser number” of elected offices or “*influence* over a greater number” of elected offices—the first produces concentrated power in fewer districts; the second, less concentrated power but extending across more districts—Thomas rejects both

38 *Missouri v. Jenkins*, 515 US 70, 122, 138 (1995) (concurring).

39 Kwame Turé (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967, 1992), 54; Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, 112.

40 Cited in Dillard, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner Now?*, 41.

41 *Holder v. Hall*, 512 US 874, 891–92, 896–97, 900, 902, 909, 912, 924, 939 (1994) (concurring).

models. Neither comes to terms with black fate, which is that “in a majoritarian system, numerical minorities lose elections.”<sup>42</sup> Any attempt to overcome that fate will be as poisonous as the fate itself, for in the American system, it will always and inevitably be white elites who do the overcoming. Whites will be the ones who draw the district lines, who gerrymander black majorities into existence. That is why, when it comes to discussions of voting rights, Thomas insists upon the passive voice or other constructions that accentuate African Americans’ status as objects rather than agents. “Blacks *are drawn* into ‘black districts’ and *given* ‘black representatives,’” he writes. District lines are drawn “to *capture* minority populations.” There is a “proportional *allocation* of political power according to race.” A “quota of seats *are set aside* for members of a minority group.”<sup>43</sup> The language gives the game away. Embedded in the syntax is a black community dependent on the goodwill of white people, a will that is as precarious as the status of black people themselves.

Even if African Americans could achieve power in the electoral sphere, Thomas says, the state cannot deliver the transformation they seek. The historical depth of black privation is too great to be overcome by government action. Thomas takes up this claim in his critique of disparate impact jurisprudence. Unlike “disparate treatment,” which involves acts of explicit discrimination, disparate impact focuses on policies that are formally neutral but adversely affect a group when they are implemented. Enacted against a backdrop of systemic racism and accumulated inequality, formally neutral policies simply reinforce that racism and those accumulations. Earlier in his career on the Right, Thomas had been sympathetic to the disparate impact claim.<sup>44</sup> On the Supreme Court he has rejected it—without, however, rejecting the underlying social vision.

In Thomas’s view, liberal advocates of disparate impact—eager to hold a specific institution and its policies accountable for acts of discrimination, acts that may or may not be intentional—overlook the fact that it is not the institution or its rules and policies that are producing inequality. That inequality is embedded in society itself. The institution is merely reflecting that inequality. “Disparate-impact proponents doggedly assume that a given racial disparity at an institution is a product of that institution rather than a reflection of the disparities that exist outside of it.” Thomas does not reject the claim that racial inequality exists or even that seemingly neutral rules will reproduce it. His argument is that attempting to redress that inequality through the removal of those rules is putting a Band-Aid on a very deep wound. Disparate impact assumes that “in the absence of discrimination, an institution’s racial makeup would mirror that of society,” which fur-

42 *Holder v. Hall*, 512 US 874, 898–901, 918–19 (1994) (concurring).

43 *Holder v. Hall*, 512 US 874, 905, 906, 928, 936 (1994) (concurring). Emphasis added. Also see *Easley v. Cromartie*, 532 US 234, 266–67 (2001) (dissenting); *Alabama Legislative Black Caucus v. Alabama*, 135 S. Ct. 1257, 1288 (2015) (dissenting).

44 Robin, *Enigma*, 110–12.

ther assumes that society is without its racism and inequality. That assumption “defies reality itself.” The “absence of racial disparities in multiethnic societies,” he claims, is “the exception, not the rule.”<sup>45</sup>

When the liberal state does take action to improve the lives of African Americans, it does what urban renewal did: “destroy[] predominantly minority communities.” Urban renewal was the name of a set of midcentury liberal policies and programs that, in the name of slum clearance, uprooted African Americans and their families in cities across the country. James Baldwin famously declared that urban renewal “means Negro removal.” In a Takings Clause opinion about eminent domain, Thomas cites that very phrase (without naming Baldwin) in order to argue that “urban renewal programs have long been associated with the displacement of blacks.” While urban renewal was one of midcentury liberalism’s great ambitions, Thomas uses it to tell a racialized story of what happens when the state involves itself in the economic life of African Americans. Because black people are among “the least politically powerful” members of society, the cost of government programs falls most heavily upon them. “Over 97 percent of the individuals forcibly removed from their homes by the ‘slum-clearance’ project upheld by this Court,” he notes pointedly, “were black.” “Of all the families displaced by urban renewal from 1949 through 1963, 63 percent of those whose race was known were nonwhite.” There can be “no compensation” for the “indignity inflicted” upon those “displaced” by urban renewal.<sup>46</sup> Likewise can there be no government redress for the decades and centuries of black dispossession. Any attempt to do so will only make that dispossession worse.

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If one half of Thomas’s jurisprudence of race is meant to combat African Americans’ belief in politics and the state, the other half seeks to reorient African Americans toward the capitalist economy, to get black people to see in money and the market the means of their ascent. This belief is rooted in a key text of Thomas’s right turn, Thomas Sowell’s *Race and Economics*, which Thomas read when it was published in 1975. The through line of *Race and Economics* is that in the American experience, economics has been more conducive to black survival than has

<sup>45</sup> *Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs v. Inclusive Communities Project*, 135 S. Ct. 2507, 2529–30 (2015) (dissenting). Interestingly, in non-race-related cases (involving age, religion, and poverty) where Thomas voices his opposition to disparate impact, he includes no larger sociological analysis as he does in the context of race. In these cases, his analysis is straightforwardly legal and formal. *Lewis v. Casey*, 518 US 343, 373–77 (1996) (concurring); *M.L.B. v. S.L.J.*, 519 US. 102, 133–39 (1996) (dissenting); *Meacham v. Knolls Atomic Power Lab*, 554 US 84, 104 (2008) (concurring in part and dissenting in part); *EEOC v. Abercrombie & Fitch*, 135 S. Ct. 2028, 2037 (2015) (concurring in part and dissenting in part).

<sup>46</sup> *Kelo v. City of New London*, 545 US 469, 521–22 (2005) (dissenting); video clip from “A Conversation with James Baldwin,” interview by Kenneth Clark, recorded May 24, 1963, <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/VCO3ED1927DCF46B5A8C82275DF4239F9>.

politics. Politics, in Sowell's telling, is the sphere of white domination and rule; economics is the medium of black persistence, even progress. Even under slavery, Sowell contends, it was the laws of capitalism that did the most to mitigate and constrain the despotism of white America.<sup>47</sup> In Sowell's account of capitalism and the market, Thomas found a vision of white constraint so satisfying it was "like pouring half a glass of water on the desert."<sup>48</sup>

While Thomas's pivot to the market was extreme, it was not inconsistent with the more subtle moves and mood on the black Left at the time. The early 1970s saw a profound deceleration in the freedom struggle. "The marching has stopped," a representative publication of black activists declared. In the wake of the assassination of King and the election of Richard Nixon, black organizers and leaders found it increasingly difficult to turn small victories into a wider vision of forward progress.<sup>49</sup> Activists from both mainstream civil rights and more left-wing black nationalist circles began settling into electoral campaigns for black candidates, winnowing a mass movement of the streets into the narrower enterprise of elite brokers, patronage clients, and urban machines.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, activists began experimenting with alternative economic paths to black power outside the realm of politics and the state. Some activists pushed for black jobs within a white-owned economy; others imagined a fleet of black proprietors and entrepreneurs; still others called for a separate black economy. Whatever the model, "taking care of business," as Carmichael and Hamilton put it in *Black Power*, was increasingly becoming "the business of and for black people."<sup>51</sup> In his afterword to *Black Power* on the twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication, Hamilton noted that the logical terminus of Black Power was never socialism or communism, as some on the Left believed. It was that "blacks needed to organize their own resources, to accumulate capital, to be enabled to function better—as individuals and collectively—in the market economy."<sup>52</sup>

While Hamilton's claim is overstated, there's little doubt that the combination of a receding tide on the Left and rising tide on the Right left black activists casting about for less political modes of action. A submerged, more economic element in black nationalist thinking came to the fore. "The American black man should be focusing his every effort toward building his own businesses and decent homes for himself," Malcolm X had written in his *Autobiography*. "Let the black

47 Thomas Sowell, *Race and Economics* (New York: David McKay, 1975), xvi, 13–14, 29–30, 48, 51–52, 53, 127, 128, 140, 142.

48 Kauffman, "Clarence Thomas," 30; Thomas, *My Grandfather's Son*, 107; Fosskett, *Judging Thomas*, 142; Peyton, *Clarence Thomas*, 162–62; Merida and Fletcher, *Supreme Discomfort*, 141–43; Robin, *Enigma*, 83–84.

49 Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 494–97.

50 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, xxiii, 35–36, 62, 79–80, 104–5; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 497–505.

51 Hill and Rabig, eds., *Business of Black Power*, 4, 16, 25–26, 30–31, 41, 45–46; Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, 153–56, 158–64, 182–92, 216–45; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 427–43.

52 Charles Hamilton, "Afterword, 1992," in *Black Power*, 208–11.

people, wherever possible, patronize their own kind, hire their own kind, and start in those ways to build up the black race's ability to do for itself. That's the only way the American black man is ever going to get respect." (Two decades after he had read these lines, Thomas still remembered and recited them.)<sup>53</sup> At the same time, Richard Nixon began invoking similar claims of black economic self-sufficiency on behalf of the GOP, running campaign ads in magazines like *Jet* that said, "Black capitalism is black power in the best sense of the word." A convergence between black nationalism, black capitalism, and the Right seemed plausible, at least in theory. Even the *Liberator* was persuaded of the possibility that "the conservative is the natural ally of the movement for the black man."<sup>54</sup>

Thomas caught the headwinds of this convergence, which was still present in his thinking long after he had made his right turn. A colleague in the Reagan administration described Thomas as "a radical, almost a black nationalist." A profile of Thomas by Juan Williams in the late 1980s explains why. Invoking the "do for self" ethos of the Nation of Islam that Malcolm X channeled in his *Autobiography*, Williams described Thomas's views on the market thus: "It is unlikely that whites will every fully accept blacks as equals . . . so blacks should prepare to do for themselves: by making black schools into rigorous training grounds, by investing in black businesses, by working for black corporations, and by living in black neighborhoods. Forget the traditional pressure tactics—demonstrations, boycotts, lobbying by civil rights groups—that are meant to gain a share of power, wealth, and influence in white American institutions."<sup>55</sup>

A position that originated at the crossroads between black nationalism and black capitalism eventually turned into a fully moralized defense of capitalism—private property, the pursuit of profit, wealth accumulation, and the market—as such. In a 1987 speech at the Pacific Research Institute, a libertarian outfit in San Francisco, Thomas claimed that the liberal critique of unregulated markets was an attack on "people like my grandfather," black men who worked hard all their lives to amass wealth, which they then distributed to the black community. "Critics of 'the rich,'" said Thomas, "really do mean to destroy people like my grandfather"—and, with his grandfather, the black community as a whole. If the black community was to be defended, capitalism would have to be defended: not as the most efficient means for the production and distribution of commodities but as a moral good unto itself, not merely an instrument of black wealth but as the source and symbol of black resolve.<sup>56</sup> Midcentury liberals thought of economic activity as "venal and dirty," "materialistic and crass." Hiving off economic rights from human

53 Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine, 1964), 281; Williams, "Question of Fairness," 73.

54 Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 442–43; Rigueur, *Loneliness of the Black Republican*, 136–37, 149–164; Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, 227–31.

55 Masters, "EEOC's Thomas," 2; Williams, "Question of Fairness," 72.

56 Pacific Research Institute speech, 156–58; Robin, *Enigma*, 97–103.

rights, they turned the rights of the press, of speech and belief, into the crown jewels of the Constitution, leaving property and wealth as, at best, instrumental means deserving of little to no constitutional protection. The task for conservatives was to reverse-engineer this liberal construction and make money and the market into the crown jewels of the Constitution. If the rights that liberals prize most, like speech and belief, involve words—which, Thomas drily noted, are also the medium that professors, lawyers, and journalists ply their trade in—the economic rights conservatives value should now be seen as protecting speechlike activity as well.<sup>57</sup>

It's no accident, then, that Thomas's most formidable contributions to a jurisprudence of capitalism on the Supreme Court involve that moment in the First Amendment where money becomes speech. Thomas believes that money is more than a condition of speech, a factor in speech, an aid to speech, an instrument of speech, or speech in the figurative sense. It *is* speech.<sup>58</sup> Thomas pursues this claim and its consequences not only in the familiar terrain of campaign finance—where he insists that the First Amendment prohibits regulation of both campaign expenditures (a restriction long accepted, indeed pioneered, by liberals on the court) *and* campaign contributions—but also in the less-known arena of commercial speech.<sup>59</sup>

Commercial speech is communication used in pursuit of profit. The most obvious example is advertising, but in theory, commercial speech can include the language we deploy in any economic trade or activity. As Justice Kagan has written: “Speech is everywhere—a part of every human activity (employment, health care, securities trading, you name it). For that reason, almost all economic and regulatory policy affects or touches speech.” When the category of constitutionally protected speech is expanded to include so many economic transactions, as Kagan warns, we run the risk of “weaponizing the First Amendment.”<sup>60</sup> Thomas has put himself at the forefront of this weaponization. In the Colorado same-sex wedding cake case, for example, the court's majority, which included several conservatives, focused on whether the state had expressed hostility to the baker's religious views, which were thought to be embodied in his cake-making activity. In a concurring opinion joined only by Justice Gorsuch, Thomas focused on how cake making was a mode of speech: “Creating and designing custom wedding cakes,” wrote Thomas, is not just a form of economic activity. It is “expressive” conduct—like burning a flag or wearing a black armband—that communicates a message.<sup>61</sup>

57 Pacific Research Institute speech, 156–58, 160; Robin, *Enigma*, 127–31.

58 *Nixon v. Shrink Missouri Government PAC*, 528 US 377, 412, 415, 417 (2000) (dissenting); Robin, *Enigma*, 131–34.

59 Robin, *Enigma*, 134–40.

60 *Janus v. AFSCME*, Council 31, 138 S. Ct. 2448, 2501 (2018) (Kagan, dissenting).

61 *Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 138 S. Ct. 1719, 1742–44, 1748 (2018) (concurring).

In a separate case, Thomas likens advertising to political speech: in the same way that political speech attempts “to rally support for a political movement,” so do advertisements “attempt to expand a market for a product.”<sup>62</sup>

Unlike his opinions on other economic provisions of the Constitution such as the Takings Clause, Thomas’s campaign finance and commercial speech opinions make no mention of race. Those opinions do remoralize money and the market, however, elevating their status in the constitutional pantheon of rights, along the lines Thomas set out in that 1987 speech to the Pacific Research Institute. The text of that speech (and a great many other Thomas writings and speeches) is the subtext of these opinions. Each move Thomas made in that speech—the analogy of moneymaking to expression, the erasure of the boundary between money and morals, the joining of economic rights to human rights, and the elevation of the man of wealth to a leadership role in society—he made on behalf of black men like his grandfather, in whose accumulation of wealth Thomas saw the path to black freedom. Thomas has repeated those moves in his jurisprudence of the First Amendment. Though he may not state his destination in those opinions, it’s hard not to see it all the same.

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There are many lacunae and contradictions in Thomas’s jurisprudence, but perhaps none is more glaring than his embrace of the carceral state. Though Thomas has written a few opinions on the criminal justice system that make room for the rights of individuals, he has mostly afforded the penal state ample latitude to violate the rights of the suspected and the accused, the imprisoned and the policed.<sup>63</sup> Which leads to the question: if Thomas is so skeptical of the state as the agent of black deliverance, why does he grant that very same state so many tools of black constraint? Even if it is the case that the liberal state of economic regulation, voting rights, and so on can do nothing or worse for African Americans because of endemic white racism, even if it is the case that the market is the domain that African Americans should focus on, why does Thomas not extend his suspicions to the sphere of the white state in which that whiteness is made most manifest: the policing and punishing of African Americans?

Thomas is not unaware of this question.<sup>64</sup> What’s most striking about his answer to it, however, is his unwillingness to rebut its premise: that the carceral state is laden with racism. That is because Thomas believes that the carceral state, even if it is racist, particularly if it is racist, provides African Americans with every rea-

62 *Lorillard Tobacco Company v. Reilly*, 533 US 525, 578–79 (2011) (concurring).

63 Robin, *Enigma*, 195–215.

64 Thomas, speech to Federalist Society and Manhattan Institute, May 16, 1994, published as “‘Rights Revolution’ Excesses Weaken Fight against Crime,” *Human Events* 50 (June 10, 1994): 13.

son they need to steer clear of trouble—not merely with the police but with “that gray zone of impropriety not governed by the criminal law.”<sup>65</sup> The carceral state provides the foundation not only for law-abiding behavior but also for the market-based activity that Thomas regards as critical to the African American community. For there to be thriving black businesses, those businesses and their customers need to be assured of basic levels of public safety and civic order. Among the many victims of criminal gangs in Chicago, Thomas points out in one opinion, are black consumers who are too “afraid to shop.”<sup>66</sup> The carceral state protects more than black business and economic trades. It also promotes the social infrastructure upon which black capitalism depends. Crime and violence take a terrible toll on black schooling, black families, and black churches. These are the institutions that cultivate the virtues and habits necessary for market success.<sup>67</sup>

Above all, the carceral state makes black people into market actors, the black souls of capitalism. In addition to responsibility, prudence, discipline, and so forth, market actors are defined by their relationship to property: their respect for it, their desire for it, their refusal to trespass against it. Among the economic manners and mores Thomas claims he learned from his grandfather in the shadow of the police was this: “We knew that we were not to litter or damage the property of another, regardless of how much the property was worth.”<sup>68</sup> If the custodian and caretaker of private property is the chief victim of rampant lawlessness, its chief beneficiary is the violator of that property. After the drug dealer and the rapist, no criminals vex Thomas more than the vagrant and the beggar. These are the ancient demons of market society, lacking in land and money, the two forms of property, fixed and mobile, that such a society prizes. Having no form of either property, the beggar vagrant becomes, Thomas writes in one opinion, citing an 1886 treatise, “the chrysalis of every species of criminal.”<sup>69</sup>

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Beyond carceral capitalism, Thomas’s embrace of the punitive state reflects a view of what are the necessary, even optimal, conditions for the persistence and survival, the dignity and freedom, of African Americans. The “ability to endure adversity and to use it for gain,” Thomas has written, is “the core of human dignity.” The “dirty little secret of freedom” is that it “is often very, very difficult”—and must remain difficult. If the goods of life come too easily, we will cease to exercise

65 Thomas, “New Intolerance.”

66 *Chicago v. Morales*, 527 US 41, 115 (1999) (dissenting); Thomas, “Black America under the Reagan Administration,” 36–37.

67 Thomas, “‘Rights Revolution,’” 12; *Chicago v. Morales*, 527 US 41, 115 (1999) (dissenting).

68 Thomas, “New Intolerance.”

69 *Chicago v. Morales*, 527 US 41, 104 (1999) (dissenting).



our powers to get them. The elimination of adversity, which Thomas associates with liberalism, deprives African Americans of the opportunity to exercise their power, thereby undermining their sense of dignity and freedom.<sup>70</sup>

Such claims echo throughout the black nationalist tradition, from the writings of Martin Delany through the darkest days of Jim Crow.<sup>71</sup> They reflect a longing on Thomas's part for the black past—not a past bathed in nostalgia for brighter days but a past that Thomas admits is laced with cruelty and horror, an American past that is as “close to totalitarianism as I would like to get.”<sup>72</sup> For it was against that cruelty, amid that horror, that African Americans forged their most formidable achievement to date: their survival and persistence as a people.

Though persistence and survival belong to an idiom often heard in precincts of the Afro-pessimist Left, the jurisprudence of Clarence Thomas suggests it is an idiom that can travel. Particularly at moments like ours, when an extended disappointment and sustained exhaustion come in the wake of a great defeat. Thomas's vision was forged in the crucible of that defeat. Though he eventually made his way from Left to Right, what's remarkable about his journey is how simple and easy it proved to be.

70 Thomas, “Victims and Heroes in the ‘Benevolent State,’” *Harvard Law and Public Policy Review* 19 (Spring 1996): 672, 679, 682; Thomas, “Freedom: A Responsibility, Not a Right,” 3; Thomas, Pacific Research Institute speech, 158.

71 Shelby, *We Who Are Dark*, 35–37.

72 Thomas, “No Room at the Inn,” 4; Thomas, Savannah State Address, 38; Thomas, “Black America under the Reagan Administration,” 41.

## 30: Cornel West and the Black Prophetic Tradition

Mark D. Wood

### Introduction

Since the publication of *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* in 1982, Cornel West has made sustained and substantial contributions to African American political thought. West's work is deeply informed by his identification as a Christian in the black Baptist tradition and his commitment to keep the social justice fires of the black prophetic tradition burning bright. Like W. E. B. Du Bois, West engages with an extraordinary range of political, social, and cultural issues. He is a gifted teacher and compelling speaker who inspires audiences to join him in philosophical introspection, moral clarification, and social activism. Taken as a whole, West's work embodies the principal themes constitutive of the black political tradition: *first*, an ongoing meditation on the conceptualization and actualization of democracy, including the institutions, sensibilities, and habits requisite to nurturing and sustaining a robust democratic society; *second*, an exploration of political matters as ethical issues about how we can best live in relationship to each other, as well as questions about the material and spiritual, institutional and individual, conditions necessary to support the flourishing of individuals and communities; *third*, a meticulous attention to extrapolitical ideas and practices that both reinforce and challenge the existing social order; and *fourth*, an innovative borrowing from diverse traditions of theory and practice. To these principal themes we may add a *fifth* exemplified by Cornel West and the figures in this volume, and that is participation in grassroots actions, organizations, and movements to advance the cause of black liberation.

Given the breadth of subjects West addresses and diverse mediums by which he does so (scholarly and biographical writing, public talks, preaching, teaching, hip-hop recordings, radio and television programs, and acting), as well as the range of methodologies and concepts he assembles and employs in his analyses of society, and that he is as active as ever as a writer, public intellectual, political and cultural commentator, and social activist, his still evolving oeuvre does not readily lend itself to summation and evaluation. To accomplish a provisional assessment, however, I focus on West's contributions to the black prophetic tradition and in particular his creative assemblage of Christian, Marxist, and pragmatist ideas and concepts.

In concert with the analyses advanced by Charles W. Mills and others of West's

ambitious work, one can argue that West does not offer an entirely theoretically satisfying critique of racism or politically consistent argument regarding what must be done to combat racism and to advance the cause of democracy.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, West's creative assemblage of Christianity, Marxism, pragmatism, and progressivism is complicated to the extent that their respective epistemological, ontological, anthropological, and sociological presuppositions and ethical commitments do not easily hang together to form a coherent philosophical or political perspective. With this noted, I nevertheless argue that the importance of West's contributions to black political thought lies not in the development of a full-blown theory of black liberation but rather in his enduring and energizing critique of unjust ideas, institutions, and practices in light of the normative principles of individuality and democracy. West does not develop a distinctive political philosophy—a project he mostly disavows in any case.<sup>2</sup> Rather he catalyzes philosophical and moral self-reflection, exposes and denounces the forces responsible for oppression, and encourages and inspires individuals to join movements to build a just, generous, and democratic society. One can highlight the theoretical and political differences and tensions between West's neo-Marxist critique of racism and argument for an anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, internationalist politics on the one hand and his cultural critique of racism and advocacy of a liberal-reformist and America-centered politics on the other. This project consumed the bulk of my book-length examination, *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism*.<sup>3</sup> While this examination may lead one to conclude that West does not provide a consistently clear theory for overcoming racism and building a genuinely democratic society, it can be said that his work nevertheless consistently and powerfully represents a unique expression of the black tradition of prophetic witness, judgment, and provocation. In this regard, West amply accomplishes his aim of sustaining the socially transformative project of this tradition.

To the extent West does not develop a distinctive political philosophy or, as some contend, adequate theory of racism may well reflect his pragmatist sensibilities and affirmation of the provisional and partial nature of knowledge, from which a cautionary note may be taken on the role of theory in democratic transformation. The point is not that theory is unimportant. Theory remains invaluable to understand the forces responsible for suffering. Rather the point is to remain attentive to the institutionally incentivized tendency to invest so much in getting the theory correct that we fail to do what can be done to make the world right. Our starting point, as West would advise, always should be to engage with the nitty-gritty messiness of everyday life and the lives of everyday people and,

1 Charles W. Mills, "Prophetic Pragmatism as Political Philosophy," in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, ed. George Yancy (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 192–223.

2 West's efforts to develop something he describes as prophetic pragmatism never entirely materialize in the form of a coherent philosophical or theoretical-political perspective.

3 Mark Wood, *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

drawing lessons from our engagement, develop strategies to combat injustice in all of its varied and often intersecting and reinforcing manifestations. With this noted, it can also be said that West's analysis of racism, capitalism, and democracy and the political agenda he advocates in *Prophesy Deliverance!* and *Prophetic Fragments* are more relevant than ever to overcome the forces responsible for the dehumanization of people of color and to construct a more democratic society. While the analysis and agenda he articulated in these early works took a backseat to less revolutionary perspectives in later works, West has been steadfast throughout his life in his efforts to make visible the suffering of "the least of these," to describe and condemn the multifarious forces responsible for suffering, and to energize individuals to reflect on the meaning of their lives and act to advance the cause of democracy.

### The Prophetic Christian Practice of the Critical Organic Catalyst

West's vocation as a left intellectual-activist, self-described "jazz man of ideas," and committed democratic socialist is rooted in his profound identification as a Christian in the black prophetic tradition. The black prophetic tradition provides the metaphysical (or meta-theoretical) interpretive framework and core anthropological, sociological, moral, and political conditions of possibility for the development of his own prophetic theory and practice. West's commitment to democracy, as he writes in his memoir *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud*, has "everything to do with Jesus Christ's mandate to love extravagantly and radically."<sup>4</sup> Writes West in *Hope on a Tightrope*, "I stand fundamentally on the profoundly Christian notion that we are each made equal in the eyes of God, a deep, spiritually based notion of equality."<sup>5</sup> Son of a Baptist minister, Rev. Clifton Louis West Sr., West developed commitments shaped by his experience growing up in the loving embrace of the Shiloh Baptist Church in Sacramento, California, a church he describes as "a very working class, proletarian church right there in the hood, in the ghetto of Oak Park, Sacramento," and listening to the love and justice sermons of Willie P. Cooke.<sup>6</sup> Says West, "My fundamental roots go back to Shiloh Baptist Church and Cooke, you see, who taught us 'to be willing to live and die for the least of these,' the prisoners of war, the orphan, the widow."<sup>7</sup> Cooke's funeral service, West warmly reflects, "was a love feast. It was all about love and justice for everybody. On a deep moral and spiritual love that's where I come from."<sup>8</sup>

West understands his work as carrying forward the black prophetic tradition

4 Cornel West and David Ritz, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud; A Memoir* (New York: SmileyBooks, 2009), 88.

5 Cornel West, *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2008), 62.

6 Cornel West, "President Obama and the Crisis of Black America," interview by Dan La Botz, *New Politics*, Winter 2013, <http://newpol.org/content/president-obama-and-crisis-black-america-interview-cornel-west>.

7 West, "President Obama and the Crisis of Black America."

8 West, "President Obama and the Crisis of Black America."

during a period characterized by the dominance of religious conservatism, manifest in the prosperity gospel and worship of wealth, power, and status, and the dominance of neoliberal economics. Outlining what has been and remains essential to his own practice, West argues the black prophetic tradition confronts the evil of injustice: “We’ve got to analytically understand [its causes], we’ve got to prophetically bear witness, and we’ve got to generate forms of fightback that organize and mobilize, beginning on the chocolate sides of town, but also embracing all freedom fighters of all colors.”<sup>9</sup> While the black prophetic tradition develops as a response to the particular condition of black enslavement, segregation, and oppression, it is ultimately universal in outlook. The prophetic tradition “accents the fightback of poor and working people, be it in the United States against big money, be it in the Middle East against Arab autocratic rule or Israeli occupation, be it against African authoritarian governments abetted by US forces or Chinese money, be it in Latin America against oligarchic regimes in collaboration with big banks and corporations, or be it in Europe against austerity measures that benefit big creditors and punish everyday people. In short, the prophetic tradition is local in content and international in character.”<sup>10</sup> The prophetic tradition, writes West in *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism*,

is an infectious and invigorating way of life and struggle. It generates the courage to care and act in light of a universal moral vision that indicts the pervasive corruption, greed, and bigotry in our souls and society. It awakens us from the fashionable ways of being indifferent to other people’s suffering or from the subtle ways of remaining numb to the social misery in our midst. Prophetic love of justice unleashes ethical energy and political engagement that explodes all forms of our egocentric predicaments or tribalistic mind-sets. Its telling signs are ethical witness (including maybe martyrdom for some), moral consistency, and political activism—all crucial elements of our democratic armor for the fight against corrupt elite power.<sup>11</sup>

The black prophetic tradition shares liberation theology’s preferential option for the poor and oppressed, a fundamental moral principle of the Catholic social justice tradition. The ethical emphasis is less on personal acts of charity than on acting in solidarity with the disempowered and dehumanized to challenge anti-democratic forces and to build a community of love and justice. The prophetic tradition affirms that God views all persons, oppressed and oppressors alike, as equal in dignity and worth, and yet at the end of the day it gives preference to the

9 Yves Smith, “Days of Revolt: The Black Prophetic Tradition,” *Naked Capitalism*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2015/08/days-of-revolt-the-black-prophetic-tradition.html>.

10 Cornel West and Christa Buschendorf, *Black Prophetic Fire* (Boston: Beacon, 2014), 4–5.

11 Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism*, repr. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 215.

needs and aspirations of the poor and oppressed. In this way, writes West, the gospel message inspired blacks to advance a “critique of slavery, of Jim Crowism, of second-class citizenship, while [also] holding on to the humanity of those whom they opposed,” a practice that represents a challenging contribution to political philosophy, as it compels thoughtful consideration of the means by which the cause of human liberation is advanced to ensure they do not violate the humanity of those who may be responsible for and benefit from conditions that oppress others.<sup>12</sup> West exemplifies the practice of holding on to the humanity of all persons, of recognizing the equality of all persons, as he greets friend and foe alike as brothers and sisters. African Americans have faced “400 years of being hated individually, systemically, chronically, institutionally, and yet,” West points out in his 2019 Collins Distinguished Speakers’ Lecture at the University of Oregon, “the best of the black tradition is what? Teaching the world so much about love.”<sup>13</sup> It is a love that affirms the universal equality of all persons. It is a love that provides the moral basis of West’s critique of the forces responsible for denying the humanity of all persons and informs his internationalist perspective.

The gospel message is also one of hope against seemingly impossible odds. In his reflections on Marvin Gaye’s iconic anthem “What’s Going On,” West recalls, “It was the ideological/theological feast of funk that got me—and countless others, black and white, yellow and brown—through these years of uncertainty and fear.”<sup>14</sup> Gaye wrote movingly and sang soulfully about poverty, police brutality, drugs, war, environmental ruin, and the social plague of dread and despair facing impoverished communities. Nevertheless, adds West, “hope emerges from his gut-bucket black Christian faith, a faith powerful enough to transcend the sins of his own Christian father and have Marvin believe—believe to the very end of his life—in the transformational miracle of love seen from the cross.”<sup>15</sup> Practicing this kind of love requires moral strength and personal sacrifice. It “does not deny calamity or scandal. It sees injustice, just as Jesus saw injustice, as a worldly reality to be transcended through a funky faith. Marvin calls this faith the ‘Wholy Holy.’ It’s nothing more or less than the love ethos, the love that lasts forever, the love that leads us from darkness to light,” a love that inspires us to give our lives to the cause of justice.<sup>16</sup> For West the work of constructing a more democratic society is the political expression of the Christian love ethic. Justice, West proclaims wherever he goes, is what love looks like in public. In a more explicitly theological register than is typical of West’s writing, lectures, and speeches, he affirms that “any resistance to injustice, be it in America, Egypt, Cuba, or Saudi Arabia, is a

<sup>12</sup> West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> West, 2019 Collins Distinguished Speakers’ Lecture, University of Oregon, April 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUDPI21I7As>.

<sup>14</sup> West and Ritz, *Brother West*, 76.

<sup>15</sup> West and Ritz, *Brother West*, 76.

<sup>16</sup> West and Ritz, *Brother West*, 76.

God-driven activity because righteous indignation against the cruel treatment of any group of people is an echo of the voice of God for those of us who take the cross seriously.”<sup>17</sup>

West’s prophetic practice is, as noted, informed by his interpretation of Marx and a range of thinkers in the Marxist tradition. Antonio Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and the organic intellectual are of particular relevance to West’s theory and practice, as well as his commitment to intervene in the discourses of religion, ethics, and culture to forge resistance to oppression and the character necessary to undertake this resistance. According to Gramsci, the maintenance of hegemony depends on coercive state powers (the police, prisons, military, and law) and consent of the ruled. Organic intellectuals, what Gramsci defined as the “thinking and organising element of a particular fundamental social class,” play a vital role in formulating, communicating, and reinforcing ideas that either secure consent to or challenge the dominant socioeconomic order.<sup>18</sup> West draws from Gramsci’s idea of the organic intellectual to develop his concept of the critical organic catalyst. The critical organic catalyst, writes West, works “inside the academy, principally in order to survive and stay attuned to the most sophisticated reflections about the past, present, and future destinies of the relevant cultures, economies, and states of our time,” while simultaneously participating “in progressive political organizations and cultural institutions of the most likely agents of social change in America, for example, those of black and brown people, organized workers, women, lesbians and gays.”<sup>19</sup>

One of the strategies West employs to connect “the best of the life of the mind from within the academy with the best of the organized forces for greater democracy and freedom from outside the academy”<sup>20</sup> is to invite audiences to undertake what he describes as the Socratic-inspired work of *paideia*, a practice of reflecting on the meaning and purpose of one’s life. West emphasizes the need to come to terms with our being as born-to-die creatures. The question we must address, West declares, is: “Who are you going to be in the meantime, in this time and space? You don’t get out of time and space alive.”<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. “was one wave in an ocean that said, *I am willing not simply to live and die for an ideal. I’m willing to learn how to die while I’m alive, so I can live life more intensely and abundantly.*”<sup>22</sup> West’s provocations aim to encourage others to live with courage, integrity, and a commitment to serve.

17 West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 169.

18 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, repr. ed. (New York: International, 1971), 3.

19 Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 102–3.

20 Cornel West, “Theory, Pragmatisms, and Politics,” in *Consequences of Theory*, ed. Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 35.

21 West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 28.

22 West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 28.

West understands, however, that more is required than confronting our being-unto-death and questioning the meaning and purpose of life to inspire individuals to participate effectively in social justice work. This confrontation and questioning must be informed by a recognition of the suffering of others, an appreciation for the possibility of overcoming the conditions that cause this suffering, and a critically informed understanding of what must be done to accomplish this goal. Without this the process of reflecting on finitude may well lead one to plumb the depths of self, never to return to democracy matters. In a society that rewards self-consumed, antisocial individualism and relentlessly markets the dangerously deceptive notion that life satisfaction is best and most fully achieved through the accumulation of status, security, and stuff, a call to come to terms with our own mortality may strengthen institutionally reinforced narcissistic proclivities as much as, if not more than, compel participation in movements for a better world. “Life is short, play hard,” says a Reebok advertisement, and many of us upon recognition of our finite existence may decide to fill our bucket list with anything other than devoting ourselves to social justice causes. Moreover, just as the call to confront our inevitable passing may lead one to “play hard” rather than participate in democratic struggles, so might cultivating a sense of the tragic nature of existence lead individuals to assume that efforts to improve the world are unlikely to bear any sustaining fruit, or that whatever fruit they may bear would contain unforeseen though consequential harm in equal measure. In other words, developing a tragic sensibility risks succumbing to a fatalistic acceptance of the status quo.

Here lies one of the principal differences between religious and materialist perspectives regarding the nature of reality and what can be done to improve our conditions of existence. Whereas the latter presuppose and highlight the constructed and mutable character of our social circumstances, the former transform circumstances into metaphysical manifestations about which little, if anything, can be done, either individually or collectively. Life is inescapably marked by tragedies. What is needed, however, to ameliorate suffering is the insight Frederick Douglass affirmed regarding slavery: “It was not color, but crime, not God, but man, that afforded the true explanation for the existence of slavery,” which leads to the revolutionary conclusion that “what man can make, man can unmake.”<sup>23</sup> This insight, consonant with pragmatism’s emphasis on the provisional and conventional basis of social forms, is vital to the cause of liberation. What is also needed is a method for clarifying what must be done to “unmake” antidemocratic social, political, and economic ideologies and institutions. As West notes in his reflections on Martin Luther King’s prophetic calling, “Radical love goes hand in hand with radical analysis—of global capitalist forces, nation-states, civic institutions and individual psyches.”<sup>24</sup> West’s first major work, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, provided

23 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1994), 179.

24 Martin Luther King Jr., *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon, 2015), 73.



just such an analysis of the interrelated forces responsible for inflicting suffering and commensurate proposals to build a democratic society.

### The Lightning Strike of *Prophecy Deliverance!*

In *Prophecy Deliverance!*, West advances a radical analysis and political vision of what he calls an Afro-American revolutionary Christianity. Like Gustavo Gutiérrez, author of *A Theology of Liberation*, West contends that “an alliance of prophetic Christianity and progressive Marxism provides a last humane hope for humankind.”<sup>25</sup> While Christianity provides the evaluative ethical norms of democracy and individuality, Marxism provides the method of analysis to clarify what must be done to achieve the universal realization of these norms. Drawing from Marx’s analysis of political economy, West outlines capitalism’s principal characteristics: “Capitalism is an historically transient mode of production which requires human beings to produce commodities for the purpose of maximizing surplus value (profits).”<sup>26</sup> Though sold on the grounds that it provides the necessary foundation for freedom and democracy, West counters, “capitalism is an anti-democratic mode of socioeconomic organization in that it requires the removal of control of production from those engaged in production.”<sup>27</sup> Those whose labor produces the wealth of society exercise little, if any, real control over the means or the products of production. Capitalism is, West importantly argues, “inseparable from imperialism in that the latter is an extension of capitalism across national borders and political boundaries.”<sup>28</sup> Racism was developed with the development of capitalism and has been a vital force in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. Racism explains the enduring social, economic, educational, and environmental disparities between black and white citizens. Racist ideas and “practices intensify the degree of powerlessness among black people. . . . But it is important to note,” West adds, “this powerlessness differs from that of white- and blue-collar workers in degree, not in kind. In human terms this difference is immense, incalculable; in *structural* terms [emphasis added], this difference is negligible, trifling. In other words, most Americans are, to a significant degree, powerless. They have no substantive control over their lives, little participation in the decision-making process of the major institutions that regulate their lives.”<sup>29</sup> While “racial status contributes greatly to black oppression. . . . significant degrees of powerlessness pertain to most Americans and this could be so only if

25 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 95.

26 West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*, 108.

27 West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*, 122.

28 West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*, 122.

29 West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*, 114–15.

class position determines such powerlessness. Therefore,” West concludes, “class position contributes more than racial status to the basic form of powerlessness in America.”<sup>30</sup> The problem is that “American liberal and radical criticism usually has presupposed the existing system of production, assumed class divisions, and attempted only to include marginal groups in the mainstream of liberal capitalist America”<sup>31</sup> Such criticism does not ask who owns the means of production and controls policymaking or whether it is possible to achieve genuine democracy on the basis of capitalist political economy. Rather than advocate for a revolutionary transformation of society, liberal and radical criticism “has fostered a petit bourgeois viewpoint that clamors for a bigger piece of the ever-growing American pie, rarely asking fundamental questions about why it never gets recut more equally or how it gets baked in the first place.”<sup>32</sup>

What does Marx’s critique of capitalism mean for black liberation? In West’s view, it means anything less than abolishing capitalism and democratizing the economy will prove insufficient to overcome racism. Liberal strategies can at best ensure that a few representatives of oppressed minorities ascend the ladders of wealth, status, and power. True democracy, however, depends on governing institutions being “democratically controlled by the citizenry; people should participate in their decision-making processes [as] only collective control over the major institutions of society constitutes genuine power on behalf of the people.”<sup>33</sup> To succeed in this endeavor “we must practically ground ourselves in particular anti-imperialist struggles in light of theoretical systemic Marxist-like analyses that link anti-imperialist struggles against common capitalist foes,” West wrote in an essay titled “Left Strategies Today.”<sup>34</sup> At the nadir of the “Reagan Revolution,” the state-orchestrated rollback of social, political, and economic gains made by the civil rights movement, organized labor, and citizens groups in previous decades, West was clear about what must be done. The “major task of the American left in this period is to gain a foothold in the public discourse of the nation in order to articulate both a moral vision and an economic program. Such a project must offer a vision of the common good that appeals to and expands the latent popular support for many of the New Deal and Great Society government services.”<sup>35</sup> The Left, argued West, must develop and promote a “more explicit *class politics*. The present class offensive by the business community must be met by a counter-offensive by the organized victims of pro-business policies. Class politics,” he asserted, “must be the prism through which black politics are elaborated.”<sup>36</sup>

30 West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 115.

31 West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 114–15.

32 West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 116.

33 West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 114.

34 Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), 77.

35 West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 137.

36 West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 137.

It would be difficult to overstate the political significance of the analysis, argument, and agenda West articulates in *Prophecy Deliverance!* and *Prophetic Fragments* in light of the post-Marxist, postclass, postsocialist liberal reformist politics that have dominated progressive theory and practice since the early 1980s until at least the Occupy Movement.<sup>37</sup> The tendency to theorize racism without examining its relationship to capitalist political economy, and often as a problem that can be ameliorated if not overcome by the extension of civil rights alone, has proven ineffective not only to combat the record growth of inequality, which has devastated black working-class and poor communities, but also to overcome racism. Liberal and progressive criticism, as West explained, “remains silent about class divisions, the crucial role they play in maintaining the unequal distribution of goods and services, and how they undergird discrimination against regions, impose ceilings on upward social mobility, and foster racism, sexism, and ageism.”<sup>38</sup> West’s linkage of the fight against racial oppression to the operations of class power and conditions wrought by extractive and parasitical relations of exploitation, and his argument for a politics to advance the interests of workers of all races, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religions, and nationalities were theoretical lightning strikes against the ruling class counteroffensive and a growing tendency on the Left to retreat from class-based analyses and political strategies—a tendency that lead to the development of what Nancy Fraser incisively identifies as “progressive neoliberalism.”<sup>39</sup>

Though advocating for the indispensable role of Marxist criticism to understand racism and what must be done to build a postracist society, West is critical of Marxists who interpret culture as little more than a superfluous expression of basic economic processes and relations. Following Gramsci, West understands culture as a principal medium through which the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the dominant social order is determined, and by which support for or opposition to this order must be forged. Referring to West’s engagement with religious institutions and popular culture, Yves Smith, founder of the blog *Naked Capitalism*, notes, “People are spurred to action not by appeals to the intellect but appeals to emotion.”<sup>40</sup> In *Black Prophetic Fire*, West explains: “You have to hold both at the same time, your analysis of the system—capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, homophobia, these days, the ecological catastrophe owing to the capitalist domination—but at the same time, the need for an unleashing of the fire of the soul and an acknowledgment of the power of the spirit that fortifies us in order to fight.”<sup>41</sup> Referring to

37 West, *Prophetic Fragments*. See Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018), for a piercingly clear evaluation of identity-based liberal-progressive politics.

38 West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*, 116.

39 Nancy Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump—and Beyond,” *American Affairs Journal*, Winter 2017, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond/>.

40 Smith, “Days of Revolt.”

41 West and Buschendorf, *Black Prophetic Fire*, 121.

Malcolm X's appreciation for this vital aspect of forging opposition to the status quo, West writes: "You can't be a warrior or a soldier without having your spirit intact, without having your sense of self-respect, self-regard, and self-esteem intact, and Malcolm always understood this fundamental truth."<sup>42</sup> West takes this insight to heart as he emboldens audiences to love themselves enough to serve others and set about the work of democracy. Theoretical analyses are necessary to understand what must be done but insufficient to inspire people to act.<sup>43</sup> It is for this reason that intervening in popular discourses, and in particular the discourses of spiritual culture, is vital not only to challenge the legitimacy of the dominant socioeconomic system but also to cultivate the sentiments and sensibilities, the courage and commitment, to act on behalf of others.

West recognizes, as Marx famously wrote, "religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering."<sup>44</sup> In contrast to Marx, who contended the criticism of religion must become a criticism of law, politics, and especially economics—in short, a criticism of the material world that gives rise to religion—West maintains his analytic focus on the ethical, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions of law, politics, and economics, arguing that questions of politics and economics are, in the last instance, questions about who we are and how we ought to live together, that is, spiritual-ethical questions. West first presented an argument in support of this focus in his dissertation, published in 1991 under the title *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*. In this work West develops the thesis that Marx was a radical historicist who sought to expose "the discrepancy between moral ideals and moral practices, a discrepancy resulting primarily from the requirements of the existing system of production—which precludes overcoming the discrepancy."<sup>45</sup> Discrepancies between moral ideals and moral practices (or for that matter, political and spiritual ideals and practices) are not a function of the ontological impossibility of bridging the gap between principles and practices. Rather they represent historically particular manifestations of "*the rhetoric of universal interests and the reality of particular class interests* within the limits circumscribed by particular systems of production and the boundaries of the concomitant social and political institutions and cultural ways of life."<sup>46</sup> It is the system, institutions, and ways of life that must be transformed. For Marx, according to West's reading, "moral language is the means by which human beings articulate and legitimate either their struggle to preserve the existing order, hence control and contain oppositional values, beliefs, and sensibilities in culture and society, *or* their struggle to overcome the existing order, hence negate and undermine the dominant values, beliefs, and sensibili-

42 West and Buschendorf, *Black Prophetic Fire*, 121.

43 West and Buschendorf, *Black Prophetic Fire*, 121.

44 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2008), 41.

45 Cornel West, *Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991), 91.

46 West, *Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, 92.

ties in culture and society.”<sup>47</sup> It is the discursive terrain (along with religion and other forms of cultural expression) on which the battle between hegemony and counterhegemony takes place. West’s interpretation of Marx as a radical historicist and ethical philosopher buttresses his focus on matters of culture, character, and morality in the analysis of society and theorization of what must be “made and unmade” to advance the cause of democracy—a focus evident in the essays published in 1993 under the title *Race Matters*, a *New York Times* best seller that catapulted West to national prominence, and in his successive endorsements of Democratic politicians.

### Character, Culture, and Democracy

In *Race Matters* West focuses on the cultural and psychological factors responsible for black suffering and what must be done to ameliorate it. Referring to protests that sprang up in response to the acquittal of Los Angeles police officers accused of assaulting Rodney King, West writes what took place was “neither a race riot, nor a class rebellion. Rather this monumental upheaval was a multiracial, trans-class, and largely male display of justified social rage . . . , an expression of utter fragmentation by a powerless citizenry that includes not just the poor but all of us.”<sup>48</sup> What happened was the result of a “lethal linkage of economic decline, cultural decay and political lethargy in American life. Race was the visible catalyst, not the underlying cause.”<sup>49</sup> The underlying cause derives from “flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes” and the fact that “white America has been historically weak-willed in ensuring racial justice and continued to resist fully accepting the humanity of blacks,” not to mention that it has defended and benefited in various ways from the maintenance of structural segregation of black and white citizens.<sup>50</sup> Overcoming historic inequalities and cultural stereotypes and ensuring racial justice requires all of us to affirm “the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us,” to appreciate our inescapable “interracial interdependence,” and to recognize that “if we go down, we go down together [as] the paradox of race in America is that our common destiny is more pronounced and imperiled precisely when our divisions are deeper.”<sup>51</sup> What is needed are leaders who will invoke the “ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality” and inspire “all of us, especially the landless, propertyless, and luckless,” to work with business owners and politicians to build “a freer, more efficient, and stable America.”<sup>52</sup>

47 West, *Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, 92.

48 Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 1.

49 West, *Race Matters*, 1.

50 West, *Race Matters*, 3.

51 West, *Race Matters*, 4.

52 West, *Race Matters*, 7–8.

In “Nihilism in Black America,” the second essay in *Race Matters*, West continues his analysis of the cultural forces responsible for black suffering. These forces must be taken seriously because, says West, “culture is as much a structure as the economy or politics.”<sup>53</sup> We must not only understand the impact of economics and politics on black communities but also be willing to “delve into the depths where neither liberals nor conservatives dare to tread, namely, into the murky waters of despair and dread that now flood the streets of black America.”<sup>54</sup> Going into these depths reveals “the most basic issue now facing black America: *the nihilistic threat to its very existence . . . the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.*”<sup>55</sup> The major enemy of black survival in America is, as it turns out, not the prison-industrial complex, police brutality, environmental racism, capitalist exploitation, or global militarism, which, as King argued, effectively robs society of the resources to overcome poverty and create a more economically just and humane society. Says West, “The major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but the nihilistic threat.”<sup>56</sup> How do we combat the nihilistic threat? Rather than reaffirm his proposal to expand New Deal and Great Society policies and programs as part of the process of revolutionizing society by democratizing ownership and control over the institutions that govern black lives and the lives of all working people, we must, said West, “talk about some kind of *politics of conversion*. Like alcoholism and drug addiction, nihilism is a disease of the soul. It can never be completely cured, and there is always the possibility of a relapse. But there is always a chance for conversion—a chance for people to believe that there is hope for the future and a meaning to struggle.”<sup>57</sup> A politics of conversion “rests neither on an agreement about what justice consists of nor on an analysis of how racism, sexism, or class subordination operate. Such arguments and analyses are indispensable. But a politics of conversion requires more. Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one’s soul.” How is this turning accomplished? In a formula consonant with Christian and neoliberal ideologies, West writes, “The turning is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s own worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern for others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion.”<sup>58</sup>

West’s focus on moral transformation in these essays reflects the Christian idea that suffering is ultimately a consequence of human sinfulness. “The basic contradiction evident within the most elementary kernel of Christian theol-

53 West, *Race Matters*, 12.

54 West, *Race Matters*, 12.

55 West, *Race Matters*, 12, 14.

56 West, *Race Matters*, 15.

57 West, *Race Matters*, 18.

58 West, *Race Matters*, 18–19.

ogy,” writes Manning Marable, “is that ‘despite everything,’ the evil of the world is rooted within man himself”<sup>59</sup> and not in the particular way human beings have arranged their relations with each other and the natural world. Inasmuch as Christianity posits human failing, our sinful nature, as the root cause of immoral behavior, unjust actions, and repressive institutions and forms of social organization, Christian-informed explanations of injustice cannot easily avoid positing some variation of this ontological condition as the tainted wellspring of suffering. The father of Latin American liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez writes: “Sin appears, therefore, as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and disappointment.”<sup>60</sup> Inasmuch as suffering is understood to derive from diseased souls, personal renovation and by extension cultural reclamation are privileged over economic and political reconstruction—though, as is the case for West and was true of Gutiérrez, religious liberationists expand the concept of sin to include institutions and structures. In contrast to this focus on moral renovation alone, King knew the Christian love ethic would never prove sufficient to ensure humane conditions of existence for blacks, workers, and the poor. One must build institutions that support the everyday practice of this ethic.

West’s emphasis on culture and character as principal forces responsible for the oppression and suffering of blacks is evident not only in *Race Matters* but also in his respective endorsements of Barack Obama, Bernie Sanders, and Jill Stein for president. In the run-up to the 2016 election, West explained his endorsement of Bernie Sanders and rejection of Donald Trump on his Facebook page. Prefacing his endorsement, West wrote, “Prophetic politicians—always with their faults and blind spots—who tell the truth about Wall Street, white supremacy, empire, patriarchy and homophobia, deserve our critical support,” adding that “Brother Bernie and Brother Trump are authentic human beings in stark contrast to their donor-driven opponents.”<sup>61</sup> Yet, West added, “only Bernie has authenticity and integrity. . . . He is a long-distance runner with integrity in the struggle for justice for over 50 years”—a claim no small number of Sanders’s supporters might find difficult to accept after the senator fell in line to support the nominee he justly criticized as a neoliberal hawk in bed with Wall Street, and even more when he declined encouragement from his base to break with the Democratic Party and run as an independent.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, four years later West backed Sanders’s

59 Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (Boston: South End, 1983), 213.

60 Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 175.

61 Cornel West, “Why I Endorse Brother Bernie and Reject Brother Trump,” Facebook post, August 24, 2015.

62 West, “Why I Endorse Brother Bernie.” For more on the history of the Democratic Party and progressive politics see Lance Selfa, *The Democrats: A Critical History* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012); August H. Nimitz, “The Graveyard of Progressive Social Movements: The Black Hole of the Democratic Party,” *Monthly Review*, May 9, 2017, <https://mronline.org/2017/05/09/the-graveyard-of-progressive-social-movements/>.

second run for the Democratic Party nomination, and again cites his vision, courage, and consistency. “Brother Bernie has a longevity of sincerity, a longevity of integrity, and a longevity of consistency. . . . He’s got something deep on the inside,” West explained in an interview with Anderson Cooper.<sup>63</sup> West’s endorsement of Sanders is based not only on his assessment of Sanders’s character but also on his “policies against militarism, policies against poverty, the critiques of Wall Street, the consistency of his call for Democratic accountability of corporate elites and financial elites and basically the greed that we see among so many of those elites.”<sup>64</sup> Though critical of his failure to address racism more directly, not to mention his tepid criticism of Israeli policy vis-à-vis Palestinians and virtually nonexistent position on US militarism, West argues that Sanders’s support of a livable wage, criminal justice reform, Medicare for All, and free education would substantially uplift people of color. At the end of the day, however, what distinguishes Sanders is his moral integrity and that he gives voice to the prophetic tradition. Sanders is driven by a “profoundly moral impulse, and it’s something we need because the greed is running amok, the hatred is running amok.”<sup>65</sup>

In “Pity the Sad Legacy of Barack Obama,” West reflected on the limits of Obama’s presidency. Identifying Ralph Waldo Emerson and Herman Melville as the “two great public intellectuals of nineteenth-century America” who developed the compelling idea that “character is destiny,”<sup>66</sup> West ascribes Obama’s failure to confront Wall Street CEOs and the military-industrial complex, his expansion of the national security and surveillance state, military operations, and drone assassination program, a program Noam Chomsky describes as “the most extreme terrorist campaign of modern times,”<sup>67</sup> to his “lack of courage” and “lapse of character.”<sup>68</sup> The transition from “the inauguration of a brilliant and charismatic black president [to] the installation of a mendacious and cathartic white president” represents, says West, “a depressing decline in the highest office of the most powerful empire in the history of the world.”<sup>69</sup>

Suggesting the transition from Obama to Trump represents a “decline in the highest office of the most powerful empire in the history of the world,” however, risks diverting attention from analyzing the political function of the executive branch. When viewed through the lens of class power and class struggle, the tran-

63 Cornel West, interview by Anderson Cooper, CNN, June 17, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2019/06/17/cornel-west-interview-full-anderson-cooper-ac360-vpx.cnn>.

64 Cornel West, interview by Mehdi Hassan, *Intercept*, March 7, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/03/07/cornel-west-on-bernie-trump-and-racism/>.

65 West, interview by Anderson Cooper.

66 Cornel West, “Pity the Sad Legacy of Barack Obama,” *Black Agenda Report*, January 10, 2017, [https://www.blackagendareport.com/west\\_on\\_obama%27s\\_sad\\_legacy](https://www.blackagendareport.com/west_on_obama%27s_sad_legacy).

67 Noam Chomsky, “Chomsky on the Era of the Drone,” interview by Steven Garbas, *Satellite*, September 2013, [https://chomsky.info/201309\\_/](https://chomsky.info/201309_/).

68 Chomsky, “Chomsky on the Era of the Drone.”

69 Chomsky, “Chomsky on the Era of the Drone.”



sition from Obama to Trump represents less “a depressing decline in the highest office” than a continuation of the neoliberal order deepened by the previous administration. The transition from Obama to Trump does not signify a shift in the basic politics of the office as much as it does a shift in the nakedness by which policies integral to the neoliberal order are justified and promulgated. The Obama administration oversaw a substantial expansion of the national security and surveillance state, a record transfer of wealth from working people to the richest persons on the planet, while facilitating the bailout of banks responsible for the 2007–8 financial crash, a coordinated assault on the Occupy Movement and tacit support for union-crushing politics, a relentless evisceration of the black middle class, and an economic recovery where the majority of jobs added were low wage and precarious. In these and other ways, the Obama administration set the stage for the election of Donald Trump.<sup>70</sup> Even more, however, a class analysis of the past forty years reveals a substantial continuity of domestic and foreign policy from one administration to the next, with every administration doing its part to ensure the rich get richer. Whether the individual occupying the White House is the first black president, as Tony Morrison described Bill Clinton, “the decider” George Bush Jr., Nobel Peace Prize winner Barack Obama, or reality television show host Donald Trump, the office has overseen and advanced the owning class’s interests with remarkable dedication.<sup>71</sup>

That capitalism fails to satisfy the basic needs of more than half the world’s population and continues its forward march to environmental catastrophe may be partly a consequence of greed and hatred “running amok.”<sup>72</sup> It may well be that imperial rulers, corporate CEOs, bankers, and financial investors are morally callous and largely indifferent to the suffering resulting from decisions they make—that is, on those occasions when they recognize the impact of their actions on those whose labor and lives are devoted to the production and consumption of commodities or those, numbering in the tens of millions, whose existence is of no value to the ends of capital.<sup>73</sup> But the failure of capitalism to satisfy basic human needs and to protect the natural basis of human existence derives fundamentally from the institutionalized structures of competition and the relentless imperative to secure the highest rate of return on capital investment. In her discussion of the movement for corporate responsibility, Aneel Karnani writes in the *Wall Street Journal*: “Executives are hired to maximize profits; that is their [legally binding] responsibility to their company’s shareholders. Even if execu-

70 See Paul Street, *Empire’s New Clothes: Barack Obama in the Real World of Power* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

71 Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, new ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

72 West, interview by Anderson Cooper.

73 Seth Donnelly, *The Lie of Global Prosperity: How Neoliberals Distort Data to Mask Poverty and Exploitation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019).

tives wanted to forgo some profit to benefit society, they could expect to lose their jobs if they tried—and be replaced by managers who would restore profit as the top priority.”<sup>74</sup> Calling upon corporate executives and financial managers to assume greater responsibility for the public good will never prove effective as long as doing so conflicts with their contractual imperative to maximize profits.<sup>75</sup> It is for this reason that “speaking truth to power” is never as effective as are individual and especially collective acts of disobedience, disruption, and occupation that make it impossible for the machinery of power to function. It is not callousness, selfishness, and greed that are primarily responsible for the devastating misallocation of resources, the impoverished state of humanity, and the degraded state of the environment, but rather the structure of global capitalist competition that compels CEOs and capital investors to serve the interests of shareholders by maximizing return on investment. The difficult and degrading circumstances facing the working class and poor are not primarily a consequence of “greed and indifference and contempt [being] in the driver[’s] seat among our elites vis-à-vis all working people and the poor.”<sup>76</sup> Rather they are an inevitable product of a politically administrated, legally codified, and culturally sanctioned system of property relations organized to enrich the few through their exploitation of the many. The problem is not crony, corrupt, predatory, or disaster capitalism. Capitalism has always been crony, corrupt, and predatory for working people, the unemployed, the marginalized, and so-called surplus populations, and has always taken advantage of disasters, whether self-made or naturally occurring, to make more money. To think otherwise signifies a costly failure to take seriously “the half that has never been told,” to cite the title of Edward E. Baptist’s examination of slavery and capitalism, the half that includes capitalism’s dispossession and destruction of indigenous populations, enslavement and exploitation of Africans, cataclysmic world wars which took more than seventy-five million lives, systemic indifference to human and nonhuman suffering, reduction of the meaning of life to the acquisition and consumption of stuff, and wholesale destruction of planetary life. The problem for humanity, in other words, is capitalism *as such*.

It is a problem that cannot be solved by practicing greater empathy and compassion, affirming our “basic humanness” and “Americanness,” undertaking a politics of conversion, or electing leaders who possess moral courage, character, and concern for workers and the poor—though these actions and sentiments may contribute to a recognition of the need to build a postcapitalist society. What is essential, as West argues in *Prophesy Deliverance!*, is to develop counterhegemonic cultures that challenge capitalist ideologies, institutions, and practices and

74 Aneel Karnani, “The Case against Corporate Social Responsibility,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2010, special sec. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703338004575230112664504890>.

75 Karnani, “Case against Corporate Social Responsibility.”

76 West, “Pity the Sad Legacy of Barack Obama.”

to organize working people to fight against “common capitalist foes” for an economy that is “democratically controlled by the citizenry [as] only collective control over the major institutions of society constitutes genuine power on behalf of the people.”<sup>77</sup> Democratizing the economy is necessary, even if not sufficient, to ensure that productive activities, institutions, and resources are organized and employed to support human flourishing in a way that is sustainable and just.

### Revolution and Reform Revisited

In addition to the difference between analyses focused on capitalist political economy and those focused on culture and character, West’s work is characterized by a related tension between a politics focused on building cross-border class solidarity to contest capital and democratize the economy, and a politics focused on forging a coalition of citizens from across the class spectrum to reform capitalism in the United States. In contrast to the argument in *Prophesy Deliverance!*, *Prophetic Fragments*, and, though in less explicitly Marxist terms, *Democracy Matters*, in *Race Matters*, *The Future of American Progressivism*, *The War against Parents*, and *The Rich and the Rest of Us*, West and his respective coauthors advance a liberal reform agenda whose aim is to achieve a “freer, more efficient, and stable America,” “democratize the American economy and reenergize American democracy,” restore “America’s stock of social and human capital,” “reawaken American democracy,” and “craft a truly equitable and inclusive course to the American Dream.”<sup>78</sup>

Coauthored with Tavis Smiley during the rapid internationalization of the Occupy Movement, a movement that did more to make class differences and class power visible than any since the muscular days of organized labor, and in tandem with their nationwide poverty tour, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto* is “an unapologetic affirmation of the rising tide of restlessness the world over.”<sup>79</sup> Retelling stories from citizens struggling to survive the low-wage, contingent-labor, heavily indebted, social-safety-net-shredded world and providing a summary of past policies that diminished poverty and empowered the middle class, West and Smiley remind readers that “true democracy focuses on the public interest; it defends the common good and protects its citizens—especially the weak and

77 West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 77; *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 114. See Fred Magdoff and Chris Williams, *Creating an Ecological Society: Toward a Revolutionary Transformation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017); Martin Empson et al., eds., *System Change not Climate Change* (London: Bookmarks, 2019); John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

78 West, *Race Matters*, 7; Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Cornel West, *The Future of American Progressivism* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), 93; Cornel West and Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *The War against Parents: What We Can Do for America’s Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 53; Tavis Smiley and Cornel West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*, 2nd ed. (New York: SmileyBooks, 2012), 153, 39.

79 Smiley and West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us*, 9.

vulnerable.”<sup>80</sup> Describing the United States as suffering from democracy-damning inequality and a poverty of opportunity, affirmation, courage, compassion, and imagination, they conclude that the economy is “not only a ‘rigged’ and outdated system, it’s tragically broken,” adding, “This ‘war’ [against poverty] isn’t personal or political, it’s about systemic transformation. It’s a war in need of soldiers of every color, of every creed, and every political persuasion—anyone who’s concerned enough to take a risk, pay a cost, live and maybe die so that our children won’t be destroyed by a poisonous system.”<sup>81</sup>

In many ways, Smiley and West’s arguments regarding the tragically broken and poisonous nature of the existing system echo those Martin Luther King made in “Beyond Vietnam” and “The World House.”<sup>82</sup> In his last speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, on August 16, 1967, less than eight months before his assassination, King explained,

We must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American Society. There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, “Why are there forty million poor people in America?” And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I’m simply saying that more and more, we’ve got to begin to ask questions about the whole of society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life’s marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. . . . Now when I say questioning the whole society, it means ultimately coming to see that the problem of racism, the problem of economic exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together.

And no one of these social ills can be overcome, King argued, without overcoming all three.<sup>83</sup>

In contrast to King, however, Smiley and West do not explicitly advance a critique of capitalism as such, nor do they clarify what they mean by *systemic* transformation. They link poverty and inequality to policies funneling the lion’s share of socially generated wealth to the top fraction of the richest individuals on the planet, outrageous spending on the military, excessive executive salaries, and wealthy citizens’ stranglehold on politics. At the same time, they do not challenge the central aim of capitalism to “produce commodities for the purpose of

80 Smiley and West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us*, 9.

81 Smiley and West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us*, 156.

82 Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” in *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon, 2015), 201–17; Martin Luther King Jr., “The World House,” in *Radical King*, 75–96.

83 Martin Luther King Jr., “Where Do We Go from Here?,” in *Radical King*, 176–78.

maximizing surplus value (profits),”<sup>84</sup> its “antidemocratic” structure, its role in the reproduction of racial inequalities and racial oppression, and its rapacious theft of natural resources, labor, and life from people of color the world over.<sup>85</sup> The policies Smiley and West advocate in their *Poverty Manifesto* do not go far as King’s did in his critique of capitalism or, for that matter, as far as West does in earlier works.<sup>86</sup> An analysis that highlights class not simply as a marker of social status and financial differences but as a structured relation of exploitation and domination makes it possible to recognize and act on the recognition that capitalism is not “tragically broken” or “poisonous” for the wealthy even if it breaks and poisons the rest of us.

Given the power that capital exercises over the institutions of state power, among the “seductive lies and comforting illusions”<sup>87</sup> from which citizens must be awakened is the idea that voting for candidates of the two major political parties or petitioning representatives will prove sufficient to alter the configuration of class power, let alone challenge the domination of capital. To accomplish this goal, working people and their allies will have to engage in various forms of organized protest that disrupt the machinations of capital at the points of extraction, production, distribution, and consumption. Effectively countering the dictatorship of the 1 percent requires, as West wrote in *Prophetic Fragments*, that we “gain a foothold in the public discourse of the nation in order to articulate both a moral vision and an economic program,” which also means advancing “a more explicit class politics.”<sup>88</sup> West asserted, “The present class offensive by the business community must be met by a counter-offensive by the organized victims of probusiness policies. Class politics must be the prism through which black politics are elaborated”—a position being advanced by an emerging cadre of activists across the color spectrum who are creatively reclaiming Marxist theory and revolutionary politics.<sup>89</sup> To argue class must be the prism through which politics must be advanced does not mean working-class-only politics but rather a politics that understands the fights against racism, sexism, homophobia, religious chauvinism, xenophobia, militarism, and environmental ruin are bound together by their common root in the production and reproduction of capitalist society and by the possibility of working together to overcome these social ills and build a genuinely democratic society.

This prism, however, while partially invoked, does not sit at the center of Smiley

84 West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*, 108.

85 West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*, 122.

86 Smiley and West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us*.

87 West, *Democracy Matters*, 23.

88 West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 137.

89 See *Viewpoint Magazine* at <https://www.viewpointmag.com/> and Black Socialists of America at <https://blacksocialists.us/>. Also, Zilla Eisenstein, *Abolitionist Socialist Feminism: Radicalizing the Next Revolution*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019); Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhat-tacharay, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99% A Manifesto*, (London: Verso, 2019).

and West's analysis and agenda in *The Rich and the Rest of Us*. If it did, their project would not be limited to crafting "a truly equitable and inclusive course to the American Dream" but would rather be focused, as argued in *Prophetic Fragments*, on "practically ground[ing] ourselves in particular anti-imperialist struggles in light of theoretical systemic Marxist-like analyses that link anti-imperialist struggles against common capitalist foes"<sup>90</sup> as part of the larger project of developing "a counter-offensive by the organized victims of pro-business policies."<sup>91</sup> The difference is not simply between a reformist and a revolutionary politics, between American-centered and internationalist politics, but also in the conception of the relationship between democracy and who controls the means of production, as well as the force most capable of challenging the antidemocratic dictatorship of the 1 percent. Whether the latter policies emerge depends fundamentally on the development of the kind of project West sketched in his earlier works. In fact, just such a politics is gaining traction among academics as workers intensify their efforts to organize and fight against corporate powers. It is worth noting how far Bernie Sanders got running as a self-identified democratic socialist in his campaigns to secure the Democratic Party nomination for president, and the growing number of people who oppose the two-party duopoly and identify as socialists—all indicators that such a politics has feet on the ground to support its forward advance. Implementing policies like those Smiley and West enumerate in their *Poverty Manifesto*, which, like the Green New Deal, enjoy broad public support, may well open the space to achieve the revolutionary transformation West advocates in *Prophesy Deliverance!* and *Prophetic Fragments*. What is clear is that the time left to undertake such a revolutionary transformation is rapidly running out as the international capitalist class continues its relentless pillaging and destruction of the earth's life-nourishing ecosystems. We stand at what may well be the last crossroad in human history and confront the choice: either live in generous coexistence with each other and nature or face a future that is all but unlivable.<sup>92</sup>

### The Future of the Black Prophetic Tradition

As noted in my introduction, Charles W. Mills criticizes West for not developing an adequate theory of race and clear understanding of the nature of the political landscape and what must be done to alter it in the direction of greater democracy.<sup>93</sup> It is true, as described above, that West presents seemingly incompatible analyses and agendas. On the one hand, he focuses on our commonality as citizens with a shared interest in saving the nation from moral decay and social

90 West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 77.

91 West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 137.

92 David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming* (New York: Tim Dugan Books/ Crown / Penguin Random House, 2019).

93 Mills, "Prophetic Pragmatism as Political Philosophy," 193.

decline; on the other hand, at times he highlights class divisions and the need to reconstruct the economic system. One seeks stability, the other revolution. One seeks to restore democracy, the other to establish genuine democracy as control over the institutions and resources that govern our lives. In short, West does not advance a single position about “what practically should be done to bring about the desired political end.”<sup>94</sup> West does, however, consistently articulate a “set of value-commitments, judgments about what is right and wrong, just and unjust, that . . . determine overall normative assessments of the present situation.”<sup>95</sup> The norms of individuality and democracy run like a guiding ethical thread throughout his entire corpus. While Mills applauds West for keeping race front and center in this work, he contends that West fails “to see, or at least to theorize, how central *racial power* and *white racial group interests* are to the functioning of the polity. . . . There is little or no discussion of the racial state and the racialization of the economy. He critiques past Marxist attempts to understand race, but his own proposed theory does not see the extent to which . . . racial group interests attain a materiality of their own, so that white domination needs to be conceptualized systematically as a structure of power with its own material socioeconomic base.”<sup>96</sup> West fails to understand that “race is not just another group interest for whites, but in a sense the most important one, the one that tends to trump others when conflicts arise.”<sup>97</sup>

It is true that West does not develop a full-blown theory of racial group interests and that his appeals to the moral conscience of whites (as well as political and economic leaders to do better by the working class and poor) may not be adequate to overcome racism. However, the idea that combating racism requires recognition of white supremacy as a “global system” “with its own material socioeconomic bases” or that race is the most important group interest for whites is problematic for the reasons West develops in *Prophesy Deliverance!* While white workers on average benefit from not only a psychological wage but de facto better wages, benefits, opportunities, and conditions of life than do black workers on average, white workers nevertheless have paid a price for supporting racism and policies justified by thinly veiled appeals to their purported “racial interests.”<sup>98</sup> By virtually every measure, blacks suffer worse economic, social, educational,

94 Mills, “Prophetic Pragmatism as Political Philosophy,” 193.

95 Mills, “Prophetic Pragmatism as Political Philosophy,” 193.

96 Mills, “Prophetic Pragmatism as Political Philosophy,” 215–16.

97 Mills, “Prophetic Pragmatism as Political Philosophy,” 193, 217.

98 See Jonathon Metz, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland* (New York: Basic Books, 2019). Theodore Allen's two-volume study *The Invention of the White Race* (London: Verso, 2012) remains indispensable for understanding the formation and function of white supremacy as a mechanism of ruling-class control. Also see Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racial Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2017); and Nikhil Pal Singh, *Race and America's Long War* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

and environmental conditions than do whites and are more likely than whites to be subjected to various forms of state violence. Yet racism functions above all as a mechanism for keeping working-class and poor citizens across the color spectrum from fighting together against a system that seeks at every turn to reduce their conditions of labor and life. The fundamental division that determines who has and who does not have power, as West argued in *Prophesy Deliverance!*, is not race but rather the structural division between those who own and exercise control over the means of production and those who own little more than their capacity to work. Racism reinforces capitalist rule by reinforcing racial divisions and enlisting white support for policies and practices that advance the interests of the ruling class, dissuading whites from working in solidarity with other workers to combat “common capitalist foes.”<sup>99</sup> Like sexism, heterosexism, religious intolerance, and nationalism, racism undermines working-class solidarity, weakening the capacity of working people to act on shared social, political, and economic concerns. What West wrote in 1985 in an essay titled “Anti-imperialist Struggle and Black Americans” remains absolutely relevant to our situation today: “The relative unity and strength of our capitalist foes requires that we must come together if our struggle is to win!”<sup>100</sup> To achieve this unity requires putting the fight against racism, sexism, heterosexism, religious intolerance, and nationalism at the center of the struggle for working-class power.

The “prescription for the cure,” writes King in *Where Do We Go from Here*, “rests with the accurate diagnosis of the disease.”<sup>101</sup> In his abundant works, West advances a number of diagnoses of the forces responsible for the suffering that afflicts blacks and other oppressed groups. On the one hand, West proposes that black suffering derives from the antidemocratic nature of capitalist political economy, and on the other, that black suffering derives from nihilistic culture and a lack of courage on the part of leaders who might otherwise act in the service of others. At the same time, West’s theory and practice have kept alive elements of the kinds of materialist critiques from which the Left retreated in the period following the repression of labor and radical political movements and the consolidation of neoliberalism as the dominant form of capitalist policy. His remarkable ability to speak meaningfully to diverse audiences about the purpose of life and the value of taking up the cause of fighting racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, poverty, xenophobia, militarism, and imperialism and his utilization of categories of analysis that highlight the need for systemic transformation have contributed to keeping alive the spirit of revolutionary theory and practice. Throughout his career, West has highlighted the impact of economics on every aspect of local, state, national, and international life. He avoids identity-based,

99 West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 77.

100 West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 78.

101 Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 88.



single-issue politics that fail to take into account the relationship of different issues to each other and their relationship to capitalism. They are of one cloth, even if West does not fully elaborate how they are interconnected. Neither does West succumb to the trappings of privilege theory. By insisting that our fight is against racism, sexism, heterosexism, religious intolerance, xenophobia, economic injustice, and environmental destruction, West promotes a holistic understanding of the work that must be done to advance the cause of building a democratic society. He advocates that we fight against what Paul Street, updating King's idea, designates as the ten interrelated evils: "the profit system, militarism, imperialism, racism, sexism, classism, police-state-ism, atomization, cynicism and (last but not at all least) ecocide. The new resistance movement insist[s] on merging numerous struggles previously fought on a dysfunctional single-issue basis. A many-sided people's revolution begins, building on Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock and the lessons of great people's movements across history."<sup>102</sup> The largest demonstration in US history took place the day after Trump's inauguration: several million citizens in hundreds of cities across the United States and in other nations, compelled by their opposition to Trump's sexism, racism, and ethnonationalism. Recent years have seen increased labor unrest in the US and abroad, as well as growing and increasingly disruptive demands to move quickly to a green economy and green way of life. Whether these protests will evolve into something like an anticapitalist internationalism is not clear, though the resurgence of interest in Marxist and other traditions of radical theory and politics, and affirmation of socialism, suggests the development of such a politics may be well under way.

Whether a coordinated internationalist movement for a postcapitalist future develops depends in some measure on the formation of countercapitalist ideas, practices, and imaginaries. Their formation involves interventions in the discourses of spiritual culture and questions about who we are, what matters, and how we should live, questions that West passionately poses to audiences and that inform his articulation of why social justice and democracy matter. Moreover, West advances a nuanced articulation of the black prophetic tradition in the context of growing disaffiliation with religious institutions and denominations and an equally growing embrace of an ecumenical spirituality. It is noteworthy that unlike earlier figures in the prophetic tradition, West does not frequently invoke the name of God or explore political matters in light of systematic reflections about the nature, purpose, and intervention of God in history. As noted, West affirms the fight for social justice "is a God-driven activity because righteous indignation against the cruel treatment of any group of people is an echo of the voice of God for those of us who take the cross seriously."<sup>103</sup> At the same time, as he clarifies in an interview with George Yancy, West does not have a "thick metaphysics," as

<sup>102</sup> Paul Street, "Beyond Anti-Trump," *CounterPunch*, January 4, 2017, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/01/04/beyond-anti-trump/>.

<sup>103</sup> West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 145.

did Martin Luther King. “I am closer to Anton Chekhov, Samuel Beckett and a bluesman”—that is, less theological and more existentialist in his fundamental outlook.<sup>104</sup> West does not share the belief affirmed by King that God bends the arc of the universe toward justice or that we ought to do justice because God says it is the right thing to do. “I just do [justice] because it’s right. I do it because integrity, honesty and decency are in and of themselves enough reward that I’d rather go under, trying to do what’s right, even if it has no chance at all.”<sup>105</sup> What is needed is “a deep love of the people.”<sup>106</sup> It “can be the love ethic of a James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Marvin Gaye, John Coltrane or Curtis Mayfield, but it has to have that central focus on loving people. And if you love people, you hate the fact that they’re being treated unfairly.”<sup>107</sup> Such a love for ordinary people, and not a strong position on or defense of the existence of God, is the driving force animating West’s theory and practice of the black prophetic tradition—one that resonates with individuals who are committed to the practice of love and justice but do not affiliate with any particular religion.

Cornel West challenges his readers and audiences to think critically, creatively, and compassionately about the existing capitalist order and to act in the name of love and justice to build a society organized to support the flourishing of all persons—to build what King called the beloved community. West has kept alive the black prophetic tradition by making visible and criticizing the social, cultural, economic, ethical, and spiritual causes of human suffering, and calling on citizens to act on behalf of the dispossessed. Through his writing, public talks, and social activism West generates “the courage to care and act in light of a universal moral vision that indicts the pervasive corruption, greed, and bigotry in our souls and society” and “awakens us from the fashionable ways of being indifferent to other people’s suffering or from the subtle ways of remaining numb to the social misery in our midst.”<sup>108</sup> That West does not develop an overarching political philosophy or theory of racism may turn out to be of less importance in terms of transforming society than is his keeping a fire for justice lit among those who will make and those who are making a more humane world a reality. In this respect, West has contributed prodigiously to the goal of keeping that fire burning bright in the darkest of times, giving nuanced, energizing articulation to the soul-inspiring criticism of the black prophetic tradition.

<sup>104</sup> Cornel West, “Cornel West: The Fire of a New Generation,” interview by George Yancy, *Opinionator* / *The Stone* blog, *New York Times*, August 19, 2015, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/19/cornel-west-the-fire-of-a-new-generation/>.

<sup>105</sup> West, “Cornel West: The Fire.”

<sup>106</sup> West, “Cornel West: The Fire.”

<sup>107</sup> West, “Cornel West: The Fire.”

<sup>108</sup> West, *Democracy Matters*, 215.



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